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# **THE INFORMATION WORLDS OF A DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITY**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of Northumbria University for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**2005**

# CONTENTS

List of diagrams	xi
Acknowledgements	xii
Abstract	xiii

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Overview of the study	1
1.2	The research aim	2
1.3	The research question	2
1.4	Research objectives	2
1.5	Rationale	3
1.6	Background	4
1.7	How can information help socially excluded communities?	6
1.8	The political context of social exclusion	6
1.9	The public library and social exclusion	7
1.10	Uniqueness	9
1.11	Composition of the thesis	9
<b>2</b>	<b>CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1	Introduction	12
2.2	Information	13
2.2.1	Information worlds	14
2.2.2	Information needs	16
2.2.2.1	Help and support needs	18
2.2.2.2	Unconscious or unrecognised need	19
2.2.2.3	Information wants	20
2.2.3	Information behaviour	20
2.2.3.1	Information sources	22
2.3	Community	22
2.3.1	Small worlds	23
2.3.2	Social worlds	23

2.3.3	Life worlds	24
2.4	Disadvantage and social exclusion	24
2.4.1	Social exclusion	25
2.5	Chapter summary	27
<b>3</b>	<b>REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1	Introduction	28
3.2	General studies of information behaviour	29
3.2.1	Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS)	30
3.3	Models of information seeking behaviour	32
3.4	Information behaviour in disadvantaged populations	37
3.4.1	Chatman's research	38
3.4.2	Information needs	41
3.4.3	Information seeking and sources	43
3.5	Barriers to information access	45
3.6	Chapter summary	48
<b>4</b>	<b>METHODOLOGY AND METHODS</b>	<b>50</b>
4.1	Introduction	50
4.2	Methodological framework	50
4.3	The research design	52
4.3.1	A case study approach	54
4.4	Gaining entry	55
4.5	Sampling issues	56
4.5.1	The setting	56
4.5.2	Research participants: residents	57
4.5.3	Research participants: key workers	59
4.6	Data collection methods	60
4.6.1	Data collection methods considered	61
4.6.2	Data collection methods used in this study	63
4.6.3	Phase 1: orientation and overview	64



4.6.3.1	Participant observation	64
4.6.3.2	Designing the interview framework	66
4.6.3.3	Engaging with the community: trust, reciprocity and rapport	67
4.6.4	Phase 2: focused exploration	69
4.6.4.1	Episodic narrative interviews with residents	70
4.6.4.2	The interviews	72
4.6.4.3	Semi-structured interviews with key staff	74
4.6.5	Phase 3: member checks and closure	75
4.7	Data analysis	77
4.7.1	Step 1: preparing the data	78
4.7.1.1	Preparing the interview data	79
4.7.1.2	Preparing the participant observation data	80
4.7.1.3	Preparing other data	80
4.7.2	Step 2: unitising the data	80
4.7.3	Step 3: identifying the thematic framework	81
4.7.4	Step 4: a change of plan – tackling the data	84
4.7.5	Step 5: back on track – data mapping	86
4.7.6	Step 6: integration of data and writing the research	86
4.8	Trustworthiness	87
4.8.1	Credibility	87
4.8.2	Transferability	88
4.8.3	Dependability	89
4.8.4	Confirmability	89
4.9	Reflexivity	89
4.10	Ethical concerns	90
4.11	Chapter summary	91
<b>5</b>	<b>EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE COMMUNITY</b>	<b>93</b>
5.1	Introduction	93
5.2	The community setting	93
5.2.1	Information resources in the community centre	95
5.3	Everyday small worlds	96

5.3.1	Insularity	97
5.3.1.1	Comfort zones	98
5.3.1.2	Community spirit	98
5.3.1.3	Stigma	98
5.3.1.4	Isolation	99
5.3.1.5	Trust	99
5.3.1.6	Outsiders	100
5.3.1.7	Social networks	101
5.3.1.8	The matriarchal influence	101
5.3.1.9	Living for the day	102
5.3.2	Cultural issues	103
5.3.2.1	Attitudes to learning	103
5.3.2.2	Ambitions and aspirations	103
5.3.2.3	Image and self-confidence	104
5.3.2.4	Jealousy and fear of change	104
5.3.2.5	Attitudes towards officials and bureaucracy	105
5.3.2.6	Attitudes towards rules	105
5.3.2.7	Language and communication	106
5.3.2.7.1	An indigenous language?	106
5.3.2.7.2	Literacy	106
5.3.2.7.3	Patronising language	106
5.3.2.7.4	Communication	107
5.3.2.7.5	Semantic barriers	107
5.3.3	Everyday problems in the community	107
5.3.3.1	Finances	107
5.3.3.2	Employment	108
5.3.3.3	Health	108
5.3.3.4	Stressful lifestyles	109
5.3.3.4.1	Crime	109
5.3.3.4.2	Violence	110
5.3.3.4.3	Drugs	110
5.3.3.4.4	Relationships	111
5.3.3.4.5	Turbulent emotions	111
5.4	Chapter summary	112
<b>6</b>	<b>INFORMATION NEEDS</b>	<b>113</b>
6.1	Introduction	113
6.2	Research participants' understanding of the term information	113
6.3	Information needs	116

6.4	General help and support	120
6.4.1	<i>Practical and emotional support</i>	120
6.4.2	Making phone calls	121
6.4.3	Form filling	121
6.5	Benefits	122
6.5.1	Benefits entitlements	123
6.5.2	Coping on benefits	124
6.6	Community safety	124
6.6.1	Petty crime	125
6.6.2	Children's safety	125
6.6.3	CCTV cameras	126
6.6.4	Domestic violence	126
6.6.5	Drugs	127
6.7	Consumer issues	127
6.7.1	Best prices	128
6.7.2	<i>Consumer problems</i>	128
6.8	Employment and preparing for employment	129
6.8.1	Preparing for employment	130
6.8.2	Employment information	130
6.9	Family relationships	131
6.9.1	Child welfare	131
6.9.2	Adult relationships	133
6.9.2.1	Abusive relationships	133
6.9.2.2	Caring responsibilities	134
6.10	Financial issues	134
6.10.1	Savings and banking	134
6.10.2	Debt	135
6.11	Health	136
6.11.1	Mental and emotional health	137
6.11.2	Physical health	137
6.11.3	The health information days	138
6.12	Housing	139

6.12.1 Repairs	139
6.12.2 Damp	140
6.12.3 Overcrowding	140
6.12.4 Rent and rates	141
6.13 Learning	141
6.13.1 Basic skills needs	141
6.13.2 Issues associated with children's schooling	142
6.13.3 General learning needs	143
6.14 News	144
6.14.1 Estate news	144
6.14.2 Local news	145
6.14.3 National and global news	145
6.15 Recreation	146
6.15.1 Reading	146
6.16 Transport	147
6.17 Chapter summary	147
<b>7 RESPONDING TO INFORMATION NEEDS</b>	<b>149</b>
7.1 Introduction	149
7.2 Active and passive information seeking	150
7.3 On the estate: social networks	151
7.3.1 Word of mouth	151
7.3.2 Residents as information intermediaries	153
7.3.3 Self-reliance	153
7.3.4 Family	154
7.3.5 Friends and neighbours	154
7.3.6 Workers as information intermediaries	155
7.3.6.1 Other inter-personal information sources	156
7.3.6.2 Reasons for not using workers for information	157
7.3.7 The wider estate community	158
7.3.8 The primary school	158
7.3.9 The community resource centre	159
7.4 On the estate: technology and media	160

7.4.1	Technology: computers and the Internet	161
7.4.1.1	Regular Internet use	162
7.4.1.2	Internet fears	162
7.4.1.3	Intending to use the Internet	163
7.4.2	Paper-based sources	163
7.4.2.1	Leaflets and flyers	163
7.4.2.2	Notice boards	164
7.4.2.3	The community newsletter	164
7.4.3	Media sources	165
7.4.3.1	Newspapers	165
7.4.3.1.1	The local newspaper	165
7.4.3.1.2	Regional newspapers	166
7.4.3.1.3	National newspapers	166
7.4.3.2	Magazines	166
7.4.3.3	TV	167
7.4.3.4	Radio	167
7.4.3.5	Teletext	167
7.5	Off the estate	168
7.5.1	Phone use	169
7.5.2	The benefits office	169
7.5.3	Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)	170
7.5.4	Local colleges	170
7.5.5	City council	171
7.5.6	Health professionals	171
7.5.6.1	GPs	172
7.5.6.2	Mental health professionals	172
7.5.6.3	Samaritans	173
7.5.7	The job centre	173
7.5.8	The police	173
7.5.9	The public library	174
7.5.9.1	Library users	174
7.5.9.2	Library non-users	175
7.5.10	The women's refuge	176
7.5.11	Friends off the estate	176
7.5.12	The town centre	176
7.6	Chapter summary	177

<b>8</b>	<b>BARRIERS TO INFORMATION</b>	<b>179</b>
8.1	Introduction	179
8.2	Small world barriers: personal and cultural aspects	181
8.2.1	Insularity	181
8.2.1.1	Privacy and confidentiality	181
8.2.1.2	Dislike of bureaucracy and formal institutions	182
8.2.1.3	Self-confidence	183
8.2.2	Lack of trust	184
8.2.2.1	Building trust	185
8.2.2.1.1	Approachability	186
8.2.2.1.2	Familiarity	186
8.2.2.1.3	Friendliness and helpfulness	187
8.2.2.1.4	Knowledgeability, expertise and making links: information intermediaries	187
8.2.2.1.5	Down-to-earth nature	188
8.2.2.1.6	Sense of humour	188
8.2.2.1.7	Supportiveness	188
8.2.3	Language and communication	189
8.2.3.1	Articulation of needs	189
8.2.3.2	Internal communication: cliques	190
8.2.3.3	Listening skills	190
8.2.3.4	Literacy and complex language	190
8.2.4	Doorstep culture: right here, right now	191
8.3	Institutional barriers	192
8.3.1	Bureaucracy	192
8.3.1.1	Formal dress	193
8.3.1.2	Formal nature of institutions	193
8.3.2	Cost	194
8.3.3	Lack of awareness	194
8.3.4	Location	195
8.3.5	Opening hours	196
8.3.6	Patronising attitudes	196
8.3.7	Prejudice	196
8.3.8	Time to listen, to understand and to help	197
8.4	Overcoming tensions and barriers: information enablers	197

8.4.1	The ideal person	198
8.4.2	The ideal place	199
8.5	Chapter summary	200
<b>9</b>	<b>REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH</b>	<b>202</b>
9.1	Introduction	202
9.2	Reflections on the methodology	202
9.2.1	Reflections on data analysis and presentation	206
9.3	Reflections on emotions engendered by the research	207
9.4	Further issues for reflection	210
<b>10</b>	<b>DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>211</b>
10.1	Introduction	211
10.2	Addressing the research objectives	212
10.2.1	Key concepts	212
10.2.2	What was everyday life like in the community?	213
10.2.3	How did participants view the word <i>information</i> ?	215
10.2.4	What were the information needs of the community?	217
10.2.5	Help and information seeking	219
10.2.6	Barriers to information access	223
10.3	A new model of information behaviour	226
10.3.1	Grounded model of situational process of information acquisition	228
10.3.2	Eileen's search for help and information	229
10.3.3	Relationship with previous models	232
10.4	Implications for practice	234
10.4.1	Value and use inter-personal skills	234
10.4.2	Use the term <i>information</i> cautiously	235
10.4.3	Ensure people are equipped with information skills	236
10.4.4	Start where people are	236
10.4.5	Provide a one-stop shop	237
10.4.6	Do not use purely quantitative ways of measuring success	238
10.4.7	Provide continuity	238

10.4.8 Work in partnership with other information and care providers	239
10.4.9 Is there a role for libraries?	239
10.4.10 Provide training in Internet use	240
10.5 Closing statement	241

<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>245</b>
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<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>A-268</b>
Appendix A: Research participant vignettes	A-269
Appendix B: Letter of introduction	A-283
Appendix C: Interview framework (residents: final version)	A-284
Appendix D: Rep grid prompt	A-287
Appendix E: Interview framework (key workers)	A-288
Appendix F: 'The Main Event' report	A-289
Appendix G: Library visit	A-300
Appendix H: Data themes	A-303
Appendix I: Member-checking	A-309
Appendix J: Participants' responses	A-313
Published papers	A-316



## **LIST OF DIAGRAMS**

Figure 1	Concepts explored in the study	12
Figure 2	Information worlds	15
Figure 3	Maslow's hierarchy of needs	17
Figure 4	Conceptualising information needs	19
Figure 5	The development of the literature review	29
Figure 6	Factors affecting choice of information source across different studies	45
Figure 7	Barriers to information access	46
Figure 8	Research design	53
Figure 9	Design of the case study	54
Figure 10	Data collection methods used in the study	63
Figure 11	A unitised chunk of data	81
Figure 12	Mapping of emerging themes	83
Figure 13	Spreadsheet headings for interviews database (information behaviour)	84
Figure 14	Spreadsheet headings for 'small worlds' database	85
Figure 15	Life on the estate	94
Figure 16	Aspects of small world lives impacting information behaviour	97
Figure 17	Information and help needs categories	117
Figure 18	Inter-relationships among information and help needs	119
Figure 19	Tensions between cultural and institutional barriers	180
Figure 20	Enabling access: the ideal attributes of an information provider	198
Figure 21	The research question and the objectives guiding it	211
Figure 22	Grounded model of situational process of information behaviour in a disadvantaged community	227
Figure 23	Eileen's search for information and help	230

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## ABSTRACT

Information seeking in context is a developing area of research, which explores the subject in settings ranging from high schools to legal practices to health organisations. Relatively little research, however, has been devoted to information behaviour in disadvantaged communities from a non-library perspective, particularly within a UK context. This study contributes to this field of research by exploring the information worlds – the everyday lives and information behaviour – of people living on a disadvantaged estate in Northeast England.

The project was firmly rooted within the qualitative paradigm and employed a combination of ethnographic data collection methods to explore information behaviour including episodic narrative and extended participant observation. Interviews were carried out with 21 estate residents and with 13 key workers.

The study discovered that everyday life on the estate was difficult and complex, a fact mirrored in the participants' information needs and in their information seeking behaviour. Cognitive information needs stemmed from everyday life issues such as debts, employment and health problems and were often met only with affective support from informal networks of family, friends and trusted on-estate regeneration workers. Trust was a major factor in information seeking owing to the insular nature of the estate and the participants' need for confidentiality and privacy. Participants often used the term *information* to indicate what was happening on the estate in terms of gossip and local news, but they also found the term a worrying one, associating it with intrusive questioning and with formal institutions. Formal, off-estate information providers were used for health reasons or in crisis situations, and the public library was not considered as an information source.

In order to overcome the many barriers to information seeking, information providers need to focus on working in ongoing partnership with other agencies and on developing trusting relationships with people within their communities.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Overview of the study

Social exclusion is one of the major political buzzwords of our time and is an issue that has received considerable political attention. More effective access to information is one of the factors the UK government believes will contribute towards eradicating social exclusion. Although there is a history of research into the information behaviour of disadvantaged groups in the USA and there has been policy-based UK research into information and social exclusion, at the time of writing no previous UK research has explored information needs and seeking from a socially excluded perspective. This study addresses the omission and is unique and innovative, as it is the first major detailed UK investigation into the information behaviour of a disadvantaged community at a time when the whole notion of information deprivation is a significant social and political issue.

The setting for the fieldwork was an estate in Northeast England, which was one of the worst 10% in the UK, according to government indices of multiple deprivation. The majority of people living there were long-term unemployed with a history of ill-health, criminal activity, debt problems and low expectations. The estate was extremely insular and was seen locally as a place to be avoided.

The methodology adopted in this study was a qualitative one entirely suited to exploratory research that sought to gain an emic perspective of information behaviour within a specific context. A combination of ethnographic methods, including participant observation and episodic narrative interviewing, was used in order to gain and maintain the trust of the community and in order to obtain a holistic picture of information behaviour using a social constructionist approach. The overall design was emergent, which allowed for unforeseen issues to be explored.

Research participants' everyday lives were messy and complicated, and their information needs were associated with coping with everyday life and were multi-faceted and complex. Among the important findings emerging from this study was the role of trust in information behaviour: people living in this insular community found it very difficult to trust anyone outside their social networks. This had huge implications for information behaviour: external formal help and information providers were used seldom

with the exception of health professionals, benefits providers and, in extremis, the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB). This resulted in the use of local social networks for information, which were sometimes unreliable and inefficient. However, a popular information ground for many participants was the local community centre where help and information was accessed actively via use of information intermediaries and passively via chatting. The culmination of this research was the development of a new empirically grounded model of information behaviour within the context of a disadvantaged community, which contributes a new dimension to previous models of user behaviour.

This unique study contributes to the field of user-centred, social constructionist approaches to information behaviour by offering a detailed, UK user-based perspective. It reinforces findings from previous similar studies by emphasising that context and everyday life are integral to information behaviour. The study's unique contribution to knowledge lies in several aspects: its insight into a user-centred understanding of the term *information*, its emphasis on the affective aspects of information behaviour, particularly trust, its introduction of a new model of information behaviour and its suggestions to policy makers, from a user perspective, of ways to overcome barriers to information access.

## 1.2 The research aim

The broad aim of this research was to explore the information worlds of people living in a disadvantaged community.

## 1.3 The research question

*What is the information behaviour of people living in the small world of a disadvantaged community in terms of their information and help needs, the ways they respond to them and the barriers they encounter?*

## 1.4 Research objectives

This study was guided by several objectives; however, it was acknowledged that since the research design was emergent, objectives would be modified in response to the direction of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The original objectives were modified as the

research progressed to reflect important emerging findings: it became apparent during the early stages of fieldwork that public libraries played an almost non-existent role in the lives of the research participants and it was thus considered more valuable to focus on information behaviour and on barriers to access rather than attitudes to the library. Another important issue emerging from the fieldwork was the participants' distinct conceptualisation of the term *information*; this was therefore included as an objective to be explored more fully. The objectives are presented below and were to:

- explore the concepts of information, disadvantage and community within the bounds of the study,
- learn about everyday life in a 'disadvantaged' community and how it affects information behaviour,
- explore participants' perceptions of the term *information*,
- present a detailed picture of people's information needs,
- investigate how and where people search for help and information,
- investigate the barriers or perceived barriers to information access from the participants' perspective, and
- suggest ways to improve access to help and information and to inform the development of information provision within this context.

## 1.5 Rationale

Previous studies have shown that all people encounter situations in which they '*experience difficulties in recognizing, expressing and meeting their needs for information*' (Durrance and Pettigrew, 2001b: 2). If this happens to all people, including those who are considered educated and self-confident, how much more difficult must it be for those who lack these skills because of life circumstances? The plethora of government initiatives aimed at tackling social exclusion and the proposition that libraries are institutions well-placed to help tackle it via the People's Network (Library and Information Commission (LIC), 1997) led the researcher to consider whether government efforts to make information available and accessible for all could work in practice, and to wonder how socially excluded people found and used information. This study moved away from library related information behaviour to explore information behaviour from

the perspective of the person-in-context. By studying the socially excluded, for whom information has the potential to help overcome everyday life problems, information providers will be better equipped to provide relevant information.

A further impetus for this project stemmed from a call for further research into excluded communities which, *'explores the 'life world' of individuals, communities and social groups and relates it to information giving and seeking'* (Muddiman et al, 2000c: 185) and from the belief that *'more research is needed into ... how barriers to access can be removed'* (ibid: 62). The present study addresses these gaps in research. By gaining an understanding of the *'cultural machinery'* (Crabtree et al, 1998) of the community using ethnographic methods, this study explored participants' everyday life worlds and information behaviour including the barriers they faced. Chatman (1996a) suggests that the information needs of the poor are shaped within a larger social context and that the process of understanding their needs *'begins with research that looks at their social environment and that defines information from their perspective'* (p.205). A fascination with Chatman's (1985, 1987, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1999) explorations of the 'information worlds' of poor people was also part of the motivation for this research. Again, this project focuses on information behaviour from the point of view of the individual in his or her small world.

## 1.6 Background

This study is rooted in an interest in ordinary people and their information worlds; it focuses on developing an understanding of information behaviour and of the factors that influence information behaviour within the specific context of a disadvantaged community.

It is well established in the literature that to begin to understand information behaviour, an examination of context is crucial, since situations give rise to information needs (Harris and Dewdney, 1994; Vakkari, 1997; Wilson, 2000). In order to address the information needs of 'small world' communities, particularly those perceived as being located in someway outside the 'norm', it is essential to look at their social environment and to explore information behaviour from their perspective. Chatman (2000a) believed that the average person will always sort out information problems by a means that suits

their way of life, and that the research challenge is to '*discover what issues are most critical to this way of life*' (p.16).

The focus of the study was a community of people living on a marginalised housing estate in Northeast England: a predominantly rural post-industrial setting of economic decline with pockets of affluence and with areas of regeneration. Demographically, the Northeast, with its high levels of unemployment and deprivation, was an ideal place to explore information behaviour in a deprived community. People living in disadvantaged communities have something unique to say about their information worlds, and it was this perspective that the research sought to capture.

Within the discipline of library and information studies, there has been a focus on exploring the information behaviour of diverse groups of the population such as students, academics, nurses and lawyers. One of the first studies of everyday information behaviour was Warner, Murray and Palmour's (1973) study of the information needs of urban residents, which was followed by Dervin et al's (1976) Seattle study, again examining the information needs of citizens. Throughout the 80s and 90s, research continued into everyday information behaviour, but in spite of the plethora of studies, relatively few explored the everyday information behaviour of disenfranchised groups (Chen and Herson, 1982; Chatman, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1990; Harris and Dewdney, 1994; Hersberger, 1998; Spink et al, 1998; Bishop et al 2000). Although there is a history of research into the information behaviour of disadvantaged groups in the USA, there has been little research in the UK context. This study seeks to address the gap and is the first major detailed UK investigation into the information behaviour of a disadvantaged community.

Access to information, including Web-based information, is nowadays seen as a pre-requisite to inclusive citizenship in today's information society; without it poor people and communities may '*face diminished economic opportunities and further marginalization from public decision-making*' (Mitchell, Hering and Barlow, 2001). Across the whole of UK government, efforts have been underway to improve information access as a means of eradicating social inequality and empowering individuals and communities. Information access is at the heart of many government-led initiatives.



## 1.7 How can information help socially excluded communities?

Harris (1999) maintains that all communities, whether rich or poor, isolated or integrated, are dependent on interactions with the wider society '*and on their ability to import and export resources including information*' (ibid, p.2). People in affluent communities tend to have the connections needed to ensure access to information; those in the least integrated neighbourhoods, however, may not. Harris suggests several reasons for this such as low confidence and low educational achievement, together with a lack of essential services, poor transport and sub-standard housing. These aspects make it difficult for residents to participate in the wider society in a meaningful way. Isolated communities, suggests Harris, need to be transformed into communities '*which are organised, influential, inclusive and learning*' (ibid, p.3), and information is an integral part of this process. Without access to information sources, communication channels and information handling skills, communities will remain isolated.

There are also wider implications: the issues of ICT, education, social inclusion and community regeneration, of which information is a vital element, also have important economic ramifications. A literate and participative community benefits not only its citizens but also the wider community in local, national and global terms. Information brings knowledge and learning: a means of empowering and enabling the disadvantaged and affording social cohesion and social capital. In order to inform effective policy, research of this type is essential to understanding the lives of the marginalised and socially excluded and the ways their lives shape their information behaviour. Without a holistic understanding, effective and meaningful information provision cannot be provided nor made accessible for disadvantaged communities. A theoretical exploration of the political context of social exclusion follows as a first step to understanding disadvantaged communities.

## 1.8 The political context of social exclusion

There have been numerous government initiatives aimed at eradicating social exclusion. In 1993, the government established the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) as part of a major reform of area regeneration policy. Its intent was to bring together 20 regeneration programmes from five government departments, thus providing a more cohesive strategy

(Mawson and Hall, 2000). One of the key priorities was to engage the expertise and resources of local stakeholders in addressing local problems. In 1997, the government launched the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), whose remit was to address the needs of the worst housing estates and the poorest neighbourhoods by producing joined-up solutions to joined-up problems and by developing '*integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates, including crime, drugs, unemployment, community breakdown and bad schools, etc.*' (SEU, 1998: 1). The following year, the publication of *Bringing Britain Together: A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* presented the government's response to the challenge of area regeneration. The report outlined a strategy for helping impoverished and socially excluded neighbourhoods. The government implemented national measures such as the various New Deals, launched area-based programmes such as the Action Zones and Sure Start, and established task forces to improve policy co-ordination. The new policies and initiatives aimed to put communities at the heart of regeneration.

The government has invested millions of pounds into the development of improved services and into the enhancement of everyday living conditions for the socially excluded, emphasising access to information and learning. Because social exclusion is currently high on the political agenda, there have been a number of studies into the ways in which cultural institutions can reach and help the socially excluded via museums (Matarasso, 2000), libraries (Dutch and Muddiman, 2001) and archives. Commentators such as Matarasso (1998) and Usherwood and Linley (2000) claim that all members of society value the library. However, recent research, notably that of Muddiman et al (2000a), indicates that in spite of efforts to target excluded groups, many see the library as culturally alien and irrelevant. Open access does not necessarily translate into practical and effective use, or even use at all. In order to provide relevant accessible information to excluded people, it is essential '*to understand the experience and perspective of the 'human' information user*' (Thomas and Nyce, 2001: 105).

## 1.9 The public library and social exclusion

As mentioned previously, there has been ongoing government support for public libraries to play a role in addressing social exclusion. Numerous reports and articles discussing social exclusion and information have centred on the role of public libraries albeit from a

library perspective (Pateman, 2000, 2002; Muddiman et al, 2000a; Dudley, 2000; Dutch, 2000; Vincent, 2002) rather than from an information user viewpoint. In 1999, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) produced the policy document *Libraries for All* stating that the government intended libraries to be at the heart of the community to ensure access to information and knowledge and for social inclusion to be mainstreamed.

One of the ways in which the government aimed to improve information access was via the *New Library: The People's Network* (LIC, 1997), which incorporated social inclusion as a prime driver. The aim was to connect every public library to the National Grid for Learning thereby placing public libraries at the heart of the UK's emerging information society; whether this has been achieved is debatable. At a time when approximately one in five people in the UK has literacy difficulties (Moser, 1999), there are concerns that libraries are not universally available to all, despite various initiatives, and several studies question the success of the library role. Greenhalgh, Worpole and Landry (1995) note that public libraries have '*... in practice unduly benefited the middle class rather than the working class, even while providing a safety net for everybody*' (p. 29). In fact, it is possible that libraries are becoming increasingly irrelevant and inadequate in serving the needs of those at the fringes of society. Black and Crann (2000) note that libraries are still the preserve of the middle class, and that '*... the public library...remains strangely distant and irrelevant to large swathes of the population*' (p.1). Leadbeater (2003) goes even further, '*Britain's public libraries are in serious trouble*' (p.10), suggesting that they have become increasingly marginalised since people '*can get the information, books and other services libraries provide from other sources*' (p.13). It is possible that libraries are most successful in serving a public who needs them least (Marcella and Baxter, 2000).

Muddiman et al (2000c) assert that working class non-users still associate libraries with '*books, silence and reading*' (p.183). For some non-users, the gap between their own culture and that of the library seems unbridgeable. So, although the government intends public libraries to help tackle social exclusion by providing open access to information, it appears that libraries still lack cultural relevance to the needs and interests of many excluded individuals, groups and communities. The present study discovered that public libraries were simply not part of everyday life and were in fact almost irrelevant to this group of research participants.

The information needs of the public should drive information provision and not the reverse, and the '*come and get it*' (Street, 1998: 57) approach to information provision is wholly inadequate. Bishop et al's (1999) research echoes this point of view and concludes that libraries are not strongly associated with community information. Collaboration with other community-based organisations is a way of bridging this gap, she surmises, and 'the right people' are key to this endeavour. Leadbeater (2003) agrees, stating that public libraries '*... can be insular. Librarians need greater exposure to outside ideas (and) ways of working*' (ibid, p.32), and that partnership working with local and national organisations from health centres to the police is crucial to libraries' future.

### 1.10 Uniqueness

This study explores the information behaviour of a group of socially excluded people and furthers our understanding of information behaviour in context. It presents a unique perspective in:

- providing a first UK study of information behaviour in disadvantaged contexts from an information user perspective,
- using a combination of ethnographic methods including participant observation and episodic narrative interviewing,
- reinforcing that context and everyday life are integral to information behaviour,
- exploring the participants' understanding of the term *information*
- exploring barriers to information access from the participants' perspective
- emphasising the importance of the affective aspects of information behaviour, particularly trust,
- presenting a new model of information behaviour in a disadvantaged context, and
- suggesting ways by which barriers may be overcome.

### 1.11 Composition of the thesis

The thesis began with an overview of the research followed by the research question and the aims and objectives of the study. The political background from which the research developed was then introduced followed by the rationale for the study and the

presentation of its unique contribution to knowledge. The next chapter explores the principal concepts framing the research: information, disadvantage and community. Wilson (1981) has suggested that when key terms remain unexplained, readers may be left to make their own judgements about what the researcher means.

Chapter 3 explores the related literature and begins by broadly tracing the development of general information behaviour research. A review of general models of information behaviour follows. The narrower field of information behaviour in disadvantaged settings is then considered, including a detailed review of Chatman's research, which was particularly germane to this project as she explored the information worlds of the disadvantaged in-depth. Finally, previous studies of barriers to information access are explored. This chapter provides background details upon which the empirical study was developed.

Chapter 4 moves into a discussion of the methodology of the study including justification for the methodological approach and the research design. The research was situated in the naturalistic paradigm and used qualitative methods of data collection including participant observation and in-depth interviewing. The merits of alternative methods that were considered are also discussed. Sampling strategies are then outlined. This chapter details the implementation of the fieldwork and also explains the problems encountered seeking to gain and maintain access and the strategies used to overcome problems. In addition, Chapter 4 examines data analysis, provisions made for trustworthiness in the study and ethical concerns raised during the research process.

The results of the fieldwork are presented in the following four chapters, beginning with an account of the research setting, the everyday life on the estate and the ways life affected information behaviour. Rich descriptive accounts of research participants' information and help needs are presented, followed by the ways they responded to those needs. This leads to a chapter devoted to exploring barriers to information seeking encountered by the participants and to describing participants' depictions of ideal information sources. These four chapters form an initial synthesis of the results of the study.

A reflective exploration of the research experience is presented in the penultimate chapter. The final chapter discusses the research findings, relating them to the research objectives and to previous studies, offers recommendations for practice and presents the research conclusions. A grounded model of information behaviour based on a synthesis

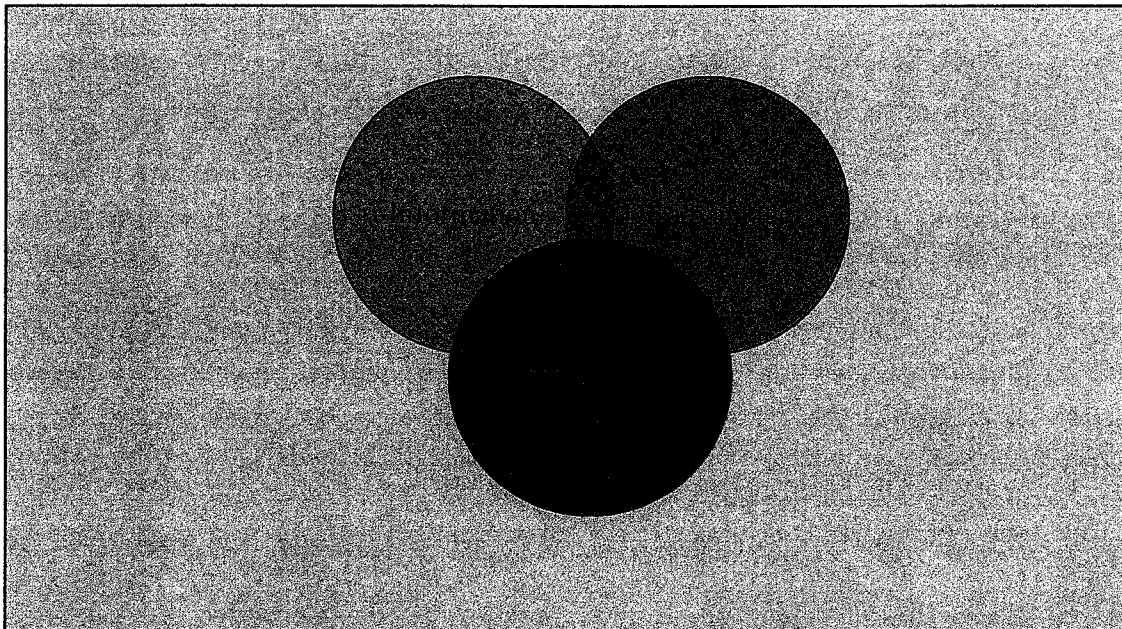
of the empirical results of the research is also presented in the final chapter. The model shows the research participants' typical patterns of information behaviour and the points at which they faced barriers.

## 2 Conceptual framework

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to explore the key concepts underpinning the study as addressed in past work and to establish the boundaries of this study. Belkin (1978) suggests that researchers should be concerned with concepts rather than definitions, since '*a definition presumably says what the phenomenon defined is whereas a concept is a way of looking at or interpreting a phenomenon*' (p.58). This allows researchers to look for a '*useful concept*' rather than '*a universally true definition*'. Reaching a conceptual understanding of key terms was a step towards narrowing the focus of the study and providing a conceptual framework from which to carry out the fieldwork, to analyse the data and to discuss the research. No attempt was made to define key concepts absolutely as this was felt to be too restrictive in an exploratory study.

The three main concepts underpinning the study framework are information (including information worlds, information needs, information seeking and context), community and disadvantage, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1 Concepts explored in the study**

## 2.2 Information

Information, as Wilson (1981) observes, is a *'troublesome concept'* (online) and debate about its definition continues in LIS. Some commentators have suggested that information means all things to all people: Case (2003) broadly defines information as *'whatever appears significant to a human being, whether originating from an external environment or a (psychologically) internal world'* (p.40). Under this rubric, information would appear to mean anything an individual chooses to define as information. Buckland (1991) posits that whatever one might learn from can be called information and concludes, *'We are unable to say confidently of anything that it could not be information'* (p.356). Dervin (1980) stresses however, that it is important to look at *'information as a user construct rather than as an observer construct'* (p.95), although studies examining information from this perspective are rare.

Information is *'an entity which pervades all human activity'* (Brookes, 1980: 126) and is often viewed as a social necessity, a *'fourth right of citizenship'* (National Consumer Council, 1977, cited in Goulding, A, 2001) and as a way of adding value and quality to people's lives by enhancing social, political and cultural aspects. As Berman and Phillips (2001) suggest, there is a relationship between information and social quality, and in order to have a society in which *'all people ... are able to participate in the social, cultural, economic and political developments of their communities and live under conditions that enhance their well-being or quality of life'* (p.179) access to appropriate information is essential. There is a consensus that information is a *'good thing'* that leads to knowledge, and without it, quality of life may be diminished.

We are surrounded by and bombarded with information in the so-called information society we presently inhabit; nonetheless, the term *'information'* remains a conundrum. This view is shared by Badenoch et al (1994) and others (Levitan, 1980; Nitecki, 1985). Indeed, Childers (1975) suggests that information is a word that *'defies definition'* (p.20), while Fairthorne (1965) advises that *'information and its derivatives are words to avoid'* (p.10). Many, however, have attempted to conceptualise the term.

One well-known explanation is that offered by Shannon and Weaver (1948) (also Faibisoff and Ely, 1976; Krikelas, 1983; Arrow, 1984), who maintain that information is that which reduces uncertainty. Dervin (1977) holds a similar view stating that *'information is essentially seen as a tool that is valuable and useful to people in their attempts to cope*



*with their lives*' (p.18). Dervin also conceptualises information in terms of communication, much like Taylor (1991) who suggests information was '*a property of conversation*' (p.92). In the context of disadvantaged lives, information may be an important means of coping with and reducing problems, enabling people '*to alter their life situation*' (Nahl, 2001: 8).

Another common definition associates information with knowledge. Orna (1999) suggests that information is '*what human beings transform knowledge into when they want to communicate it to other people. It is knowledge made visible or audible, in written or printed words, or in speech*' (p.8). Chen and Hernon (1982) hold a similar perspective, taking information to be '*all knowledge, ideas, facts, data, and imaginative works of mind which are communicated formally and/or informally in any format*' (p.5). Vickery and Vickery (cited in Hill, 1999) surmise that information not only communicates knowledge but can modify the state of knowledge.

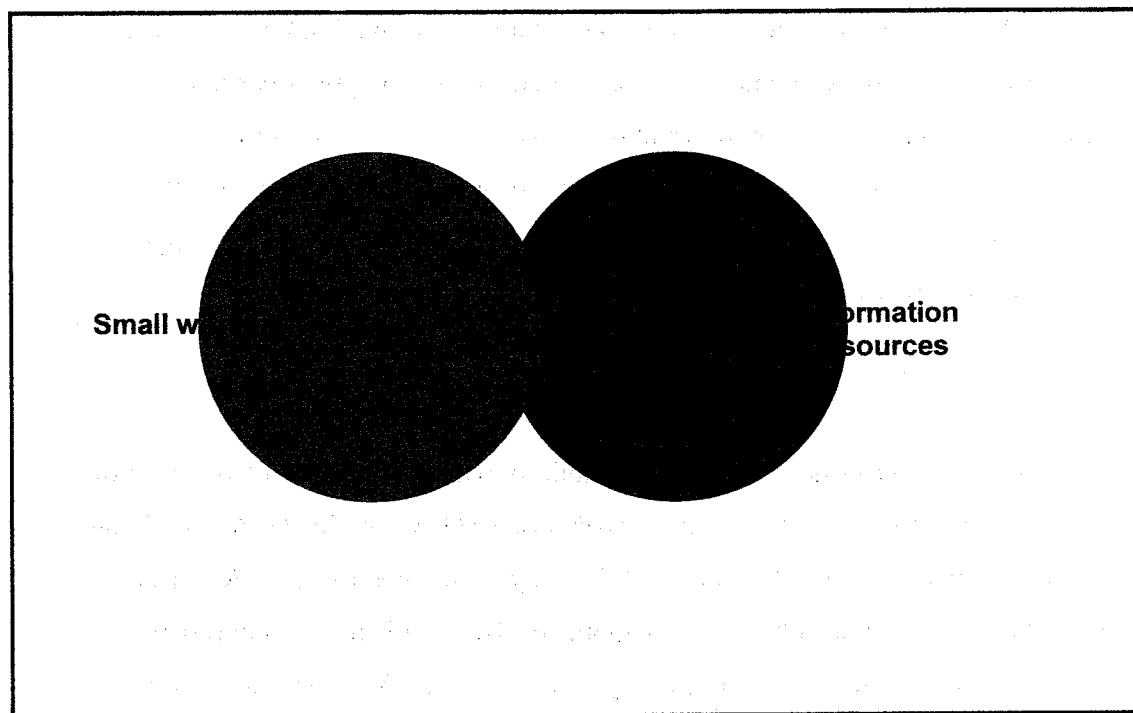
So, while there are many definitions, there is no consensus. This lack of consensus stems not only from varying philosophical arguments but also from the fact that information can have different meanings in different circumstances at different times. This study needed a conceptualisation consistent with a social constructionist approach. A useful and broad conceptualisation for this study was to see information as having both affective and cognitive aspects and including knowledge, facts, advice, help or news communicated by others or obtained by personal investigation by reading, listening or observing (adapted from Webster's Dictionary).

Exploring the concept from the perspective of the individual is important because clarity of communication is important and information providers need to know what people mean by the term in order to provide an appropriate information service. Very little research has explored how users actually understand the concept of information (Shenton, 2002).

### 2.2.1 Information worlds

The term *information world* was coined by Chatman in 1992 and has two intersecting strands. The first strand refers to an individual's concept of information and how it may be obtained (information needs and seeking), as well as the information sources used in everyday lives. The sources may be either formal, such as advice centres and public libraries, or informal, such as family and friends. The second represents the everyday small

world (context) in which a person lives and the ways everyday life affects information behaviour. Context is integral to information worlds, as information behaviour (needs, seeking and use) stems from lived experience. The two concepts of small worlds and information intersect (see Figure 2 below) to form an information world.



**Figure 2 Information worlds**

Others have used the term 'information horizon' (Sonnenwald, 1998), which represents the limits of information seeking and does not stress the importance of context on information behaviour, 'information environment' (Spink et al, 1998: 371) and 'information universe' (Latrobe and Havener, 1997), which relates to information seeking and resources, although it is commonly associated with metadata and global information.

Context is an important concept to consider in determining information behaviour, since everyday information needs and information seeking stem from the everyday life experiences of the individual. Wilson (1981) and Krikelas (1983) argue that an understanding of context is vital to an understanding of information behaviour since *'an information need cannot be separated from the situation which created it and the individual*

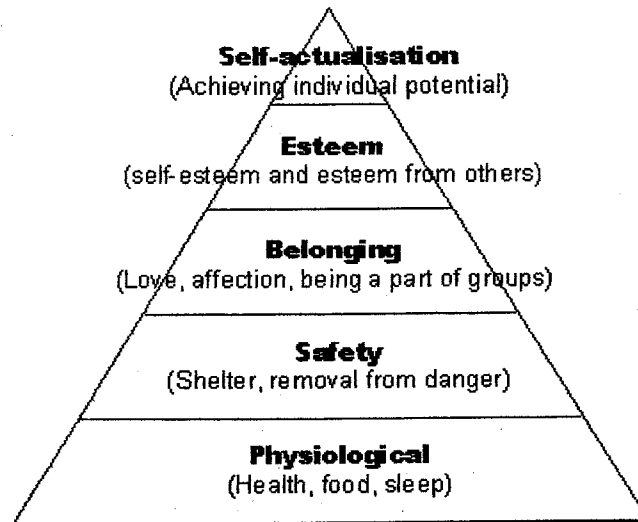
*who perceived it*' (Chen and Hernon, 1982: 9). Context not only allows us to see the uniqueness of a specific situation, but it reveals patterns of information seeking across a variety of situations; a context-based approach is used in this study.

Sonnenwald and Iivonen (1999) maintain that to research human information behaviour requires consideration of Ranganathan's (1957) framework for knowledge organisation, in which knowledge is organised into five facets: personality, matter, energy, space and time. Without consideration of these facets, human information behaviour cannot be fully described, the authors contend. The facet of personality comprises participants and their social networks; matter includes information resources; energy incorporates problems and issues; space refers to the socio-political and socio-economic contexts; time is the non-spatial continuum in which actions and events occur (p.6). These are all important considerations in a holistic exploration of a specific information world.

### 2.2.2 Information needs

The concept *information need* is a complex one and, as with the concept of information, there is a lack of consensus over its meaning (Krikelas, 1983; Case, 2003). A useful start might be to deconstruct the concept and to look initially at the idea of *need*. According to Green (1990), the concept of need has four components. The first is that it is purposive and connected to a goal (p.65). Secondly, a need may be a 'want' (p.66). The third component is that '*need has a strong relationship with necessity*' (p.66). Lastly, Green suggests that people may have unfelt needs (p.66). This final point is an interesting one conceptually and methodologically: how are unfelt needs discovered?

Maslow (1943) identified several types of need: physiological, safety, ego, social and self-actualisation, and defined needs using a bottom-up hierarchical structure (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3 Maslow's hierarchy of needs**

Maslow argued that satisfying basic physiological needs are paramount, followed by affective needs and lastly by cognitive needs, and that until our basic needs are satisfied, we cannot move to the next level. The same argument might be made for our need for help and information: until our basic information needs have been satisfied in areas such as health and shelter, other information needs might remain unresolved. Belkin (1982) agrees that information needs are a means of satisfying a more basic need or problem.

A common proposition is that information needs arise from uncertainty or from gaps in knowledge (Dervin, 1977, 1980; Cronin, 1981; Belkin, Oddy and Brooks, 1982; Horne, 1983; Krikelas, 1983). Belkin, Oddy and Brooks (1982) explore cognitive aspects of information seeking in the form of Anomalous States of Knowledge (ASK) and information needs. In an ASK situation, the individual recognises something wrong in their state of knowledge, but does not always know how to resolve it. The problem with this theory is that some people may simply not recognise a need or they may not be able to articulate a need. While Belkin's *ASK* and Dervin's *gap* are similar concepts, their perspective is different: Belkin is system-oriented whereas Dervin is rooted in the person-within-a-context.

Forsythe (1998) contributes to the complexities of information needs by adding that '*information needs can be verbal or nonverbal, general or specific, formal or informal, or literal or metaphoric*' (p.403). She further proposes that information needs are contextual and complex, and are as various and varied as the individuals who experience them.

There has been a shift from exploring information needs from the perspective of users of information systems to a focus on information as needed within personal circumstances, which is the focus taken in this study. An information need arises out of an everyday life situation in which an individual needs help, support or factual information, or a combination of all three. The researcher conceptualised information needs along the lines of Chen and Hernon's (1982) assertion that:

*[Information needs] arise whenever individuals find themselves in a situation requiring ... knowledge to deal with the situation as they see fit. Such information needs arise in all aspects of everyday life: the home, the office, in relations with family or friends or the insurance company, out of idle curiosity, or as a requirement of work (p. 5).*

The phrase *information need* was avoided in interactions with research participants so as not to constrain or influence their sense of its meaning.

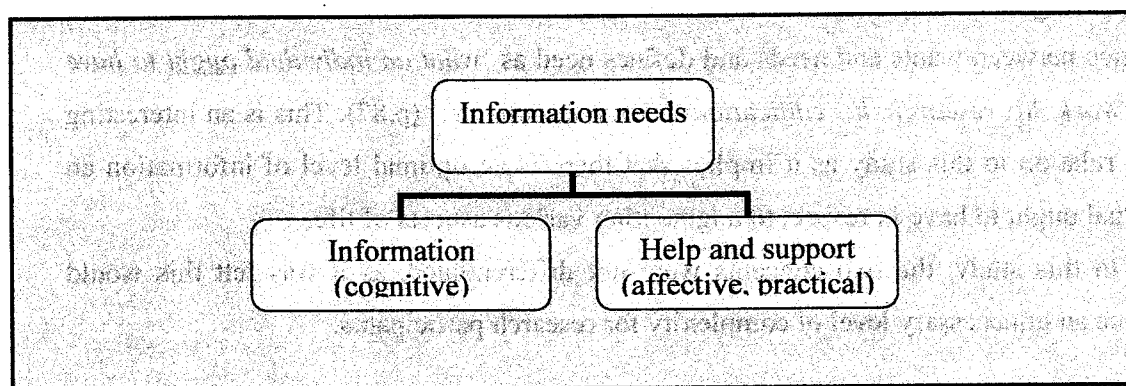
#### 2.2.2.1 Help and support needs

Information needs, according to Wilson and Walsh (1996), encompass the affective as well as the cognitive domain. Various cognitive categories of information need have emerged from previous research (Greenberg and Dervin, 1970; Childers, 1975; Weights et al, 1993), but few researchers have focused on the associated affective needs of individuals and communities (Chatman, 1996a; Hersberger, 1998; Harris et al, 2001). In many situations, particularly in relation to 'disadvantaged' lives, people need help and support in resolving everyday information issues. Julien and Michels (2000) make no distinction between 'information' and 'help', '*as the latter is a concept much easier to understand for persons outside of information science*' (p. 9) and the authors use the terms interchangeably, conceptualising help as information '*which is useful to information seekers*' (p. 9).

Much of the literature relating to help seeking is associated with seeking support for health-related or emotional problems. According to Nicholas et al (2004), '*help seeking refers to the extent to which individuals utilise different sources of support for overcoming personal difficulties*' (p. 2). Harris and Dewdney (1994) suggest that when individuals are looking for information to resolve everyday problems, they are actually looking for help. In the LIS literature, the terms help seeking and information seeking are often used synonymously, with no explanation of the nuances in meaning. Gourash (1978) defines

help seeking as ‘any communication about a problem or troublesome event ... directed towards obtaining support, advice or assistance’ (p. 414).

For the purposes of this study, help and support needs represented the affective needs associated with information seeking, and were an integral part of information seeking, as depicted in Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4** Conceptualising information needs

#### 2.2.2.2 Unconscious or unrecognised information need

Not all information needs are recognised, articulated or acted upon and several writers have appended various descriptive labels to the idea of unconscious information needs. Krikelas (1983) refers to *unconscious need* (p.8) but suggests that it is not constructive in the study of information seeking behaviour since recognition of uncertainty does not necessarily lead to active information seeking. He therefore outlines two further concepts, ‘*immediate needs*’ that result in information seeking behaviour, which is purposive, and ‘*deferred needs*’ (p.8) that produce information-gathering behaviour, in which information is absorbed into everyday life. Green (1990) and Faibisoff and Ely (1976) refer to ‘*unfelt needs*’, by which they mean needs which are unrecognised and unexpressed, the lack of which may have a detrimental effect on the individual (ibid, p.3). Cronin (1981), going one step further, refers to ‘*delitescant or dormant need*’ (p.40) that denotes information need awakened by the onset of a situation, such as an illness. Conversely, information needs that are recognised and expressed may be referred to as ‘*felt needs*’ (Faibisoff and Ely, 1976; Nicholas, 2000).

#### 2.2.2.3 Information wants

Just as some have differentiated between felt and unfelt information needs, so others distinguish between information needs and information wants. Chatman and Pendleton (1995) maintain that information wants '*convey some degree of enhancement*' (p.136) and are a 'nice-to-have' and not a 'need-to-have.' Similarly, Derr (1983) suggests several differences between needs and wants, highlighting the fact that information may be needed without being desired (p.273). On the other hand, Line (1974) believes there is no clear difference between wants and needs and defines need as '*what an individual ought to have for his work, his research, his edification, his recreation, etc.*' (p.87). This is an interesting idea in relation to this study as it implies that there is an optimal level of information an individual ought to have in respect to augmenting various aspects of life.

In this study, the two concepts were not differentiated, as it was felt this would introduce an unnecessary level of complexity for research participants.

#### 2.2.3 Information behaviour

Conceptual understanding of *information behaviour* varies widely and, as with the terms *information* and *information needs*, there is considerable debate regarding the meaning. Information behaviour is, broadly speaking, the search for information and is often understood to include sources. The term *information seeking behaviour* is often used as a generic term for all types of information seeking. Wilson (1999) and Wilson and Walsh (1996: 37) prefer *information behaviour* to other terms as it embraces a range of '*activities a person may engage in when identifying his or her own needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information*' (Wilson, 1999: 249). Wilson (2000) describes information behaviour as '*the totality of human behaviour in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use*' (p.49). Pettigrew and McKechnie (2001) maintain that information behaviour is '*how people need, seek, give and use information in different contexts,*' (p. 44). These conceptualisations including information needs and both passive and active seeking were useful broad frameworks for this study:

Krikelas (1983) argues that information seeking begins when an individual realises that their current knowledge is insufficient to resolve a problem or issue. This reiterates the ideas of uncertainty and gaps. The process ends when the individual has enough

information to resolve the problem (p.7). There are two difficulties with this argument as far as this study goes. Firstly, individuals may not recognise that their current knowledge is insufficient, although they may recognise a need for help. There may simply be an acceptance of the status quo. Secondly, this definition implies information seeking is an active behaviour initiated by the individual; whereas a need for information or help may not necessarily result in active information seeking.

People may discover information in a more passive way, either accidentally or incidentally. Bates' (1989) concept of 'berry-picking' encompasses this. She suggests that people search for information 'a bit at a time' and alter their search strategies according to what they find and the barriers they encounter. Bates believes her model '*is much closer to the real behavior of information searchers than the traditional model of information retrieval*' (online). Furthermore, Erdelez (1999) maintains that information can be acquired incidentally '*when one is looking for information relating to one topic and finds information relating to another one*' (p.25). She states that information seeking is a misnomer as it is not necessarily an active pursuit:

*... passive and opportunistic information acquisition such as ... browsing ... and information encountering more resembles 'gathering' than 'hunting' – the active pursuit suggested in the term seeking (p.25).*

Wilson and Walsh (1996) also refer to *information acquisition*, which they suggest is a form of *information searching* and is a passive means of acquiring information. However, if an individual does decide to seek information actively, Sonnenwald (1998) suggests that there is an *information horizon* (p.185) in which this can happen; this may include books, colleagues, friends, television, etc., and is '*determined socially and individually for situations and contexts*' (p.185), suggesting that context and everyday life (information worlds) may have a restrictive effect on information seeking. Like Wilson and Walsh, McKenzie (2002) incorporates both active and passive elements of information seeking within '*information practices*' (p.25). This may be a more appropriate concept as it incorporates the fuzziness of human nature into what may be a fuzzy human activity: information seeking.



#### 2.2.3.1 Information sources

As with other conceptualisations, there are various ways of characterising information sources. Some (Kari, 1998; Wilson, 1999; Choo, 2000) emphasise the mutual dependency of information seeking and sources, believing that one is integral to the other. In this study, the researcher attempted to distinguish between the two because it was important to consider the 'how' as well as the 'where' of information seeking and to consider the nature of effective information sources within a broad framework.

Chen and Hernon's (1982) typology of information sources divides information providers into three main categories: institutional, interpersonal and media. Others (Bergeron and Nilan, 1991; Bruce, 1995) distinguish between formal and informal channels. Within this study, information sources were conceptualised as the places and the people used to acquire information.

### 2.3 Community

The term community is complex: '*a tricky word in every sense*' (Byrne, 1999: 119) and can have many associations – geographical, political, religious, professional or social; the common denominator, however, is people. The Social Exclusion Unit (2001a) equates community with neighbourhood:

*There is no exact definition of what makes a neighbourhood. Local perceptions of neighbourhoods may be defined by natural dividing lines such as roads and rivers, changes in housing design or tenure, or the sense of community generated around such centres such as schools, shops or transport links (p. 13).*

However, within the bounds of this study, the term community has a wider meaning than simply neighbourhood and incorporates the sharing of a common social world by a body of people living in the same neighbourhood. Communities are social worlds of themselves and contain social worlds within them. Why are these terms important and relevant to this research? To begin research in a community setting, there needs to be awareness of how communities function and relate both internally and with the outside world.

There are several phrases in the literature that incorporate a sense of community, including *small world*, *social world*, and *life world* and these are explored in the following paragraphs.

### 2.3.1 Small worlds

A *small world* is a type of community. Milgram (1977) was among the first to use the term *small world*, by which he meant '*the manner in which individuals are linked through bonds of kinship into complex networks*' (p.281). This has come to be recognised as the 'six degrees of separation' concept and is the theory that everyone is linked by short chains of acquaintances or social networks. Chatman (2000a) borrowed the term to describe the communities she explored, but she conceptualised a non-mathematical relationship, in which she described there being a common sense of:

1. world view or collective perspective about self and others,
2. social norms, that is a sense of behaviour appropriate within that world,
3. language, understanding what each other is saying, and
4. social types, including those who are information receivers and those who are information distributors.

These four concepts hold a small world together. People living in a small world, maintains Chatman (ibid), '*share physical and/or conceptual space within a common landscape of cultural meaning*' (p. 3). (Chatman's contribution to the field of information behaviour is explored more fully in section 3.4.1)

### 2.3.2 Social worlds

The term *social world* closely resembles Chatman's (ibid) 'small world' concept, but does not overtly include the element of information. Cressey (1932) first used the term to refer to a form of social organisation that had a common world-view (like Chatman's small world); in his research it was a taxi-dance hall. He discovered a world '*with its own ways of acting, talking, and thinking. It has its own conception of what is significant in life, and – to a certain extent – its own scheme of life*' (p. 31). A social world is unique and, maintains Unruh (1980), exists in organisations, in communication centres, such as bars and laundromats, and in geographical places. In his work, Unruh brings together several theoretical and empirical concepts, such as human ecology, social circles, subcultures and communities, to develop a systematic whole of social world phenomena. Like Chatman, he suggests there are social types who characterise a social world, but he goes further to

describe four types of individuals involved: from marginal characters ('strangers' and 'tourists') to habitual participants ('regulars') and finally to 'insiders' (ibid, p. 280-282). Insiders are the 'movers and shakers' of the social world and they are also gatekeepers and opinion leaders within their social world. Social worlds and small worlds are virtually synonymous.

### 2.3.3 Life worlds

Life world is another term often used interchangeably with small worlds and social worlds and it is similarly connected to the concept of community. Schutz and Luckman's (1974) work is concerned with the world of common-sense and daily life. Husserl calls this world *Lebenswelt* and describes it as the field of lived experience, the world into which we are born, and in which we learn our mother tongue and the ways of our culture. Schutz and Luckman propose that through socialisation we are taught what things mean and how they are interpreted and typified. Along with language, human beings learn recipes for living, including how to behave in typical situations: '*We learn to apply typical means in order to obtain typical results*' (ibid, p.56). An individual's knowledge is largely socially derived and continues to expand through life. It forms the cultural context and frame of reference and orientation for dealing with the everyday life world. An individual's past experience determines his or her singular and unique biography. Schutz and Luckman maintain that the individual's *because motives* are rooted in their biography and questions such as why people act as they do or why they have a particular point of view can be answered only in terms of their biography. This fascinating concept is an important one to consider when exploring the ways in which lived experience affects information behaviour. Information behaviour, which is a part of everyday life, must necessarily be affected by '*the multi-dimensional nature of everyday life*' (Luckmann, 1970: 581). Wilson (1981) refers to life world as the '*totality of experiences centred upon the individual as an information user*' (online).

## 2.4 Disadvantage and social exclusion

Before research could begin into exploring the everyday lives of a disadvantaged community, it was essential for the researcher to know something, albeit theoretically, of the experience of disadvantage and to explore the phenomenon of disadvantage as a

concept. Disadvantage has many associations: economic, physical, intellectual, geographical or social. According to Childers (1975), it means '*to be lacking in something that the society considers important*' (p. 10). To begin to reach an understanding of his definition involves consideration of what society believes important, rendering it perhaps a tenuous and unhelpful definition, since it focuses on a subjective measure (although there are societal norms that consider, for example, that a minimum standard of health or income are important). Percy-Smith (2000) offers a clearer and more recent interpretation, arguing that the concept of disadvantage is complex and focuses '*on the interaction between a lack of material resources and the provision of social services and supports*' (p.4).

As the term 'socially excluded' has now become popular currency and is often used interchangeably with disadvantage, its meaning will be considered next.

#### 2.4.1 Social exclusion

There have been many definitions of social exclusion, but the term is essentially a political one with negative connotations. Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional issue: being disadvantaged in one facet of life is often linked with being disadvantaged in other areas. The most commonly used definition in the literature highlights these aspects:

*a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown*  
(Social Exclusion Unit, 2001b: 10).

The term *social inclusion* is often used interchangeably, and while the term is perhaps a more positive way of describing the desired state of things it is in itself inherently exclusive. Vincent (2001) maintains that the term *social inclusion* is often mistakenly substituted for social exclusion. Vincent is concerned that inclusion pins policy on moral and spatial issues and not on the root problems. Refugees, asylum seekers and LGBTs are often socially excluded but are not necessarily part of government targets. Similarly the term 'equal opportunities' is often substituted and although equal opportunities are vital, specific groups are not targeted. In Scotland, the term 'social justice' is common.

The consensus among researchers and policy makers such as Room (1995), Glennerster et al (1999), Bradshaw et al (2000) and Dutch (2000) is that social exclusion is complex, is a broader concept than simply poverty, is insidious in its effects and is related to class and power issues. Social exclusion is not necessarily a permanent state of affairs,

neither does it describe an homogeneous group, nor are those who are labelled socially excluded necessarily discontent. The spiral of social exclusion is difficult to escape and the contributing problems tend to be inter-related. Social exclusion may occur through homelessness, through lack of access to public services, through inability to buy the latest fashion or through inability to afford leisure activities.

Dudley (2000) shares the view that social exclusion is a complex issue and offers an explanation that includes the dimension of information:

*(it) entails little participation and sharing, poor information flows, little choice, and being subjected to external forces over which one has little control ... the habit of non-participation, the habit of isolation, and a perceived lack of opportunity and choice (p. 31).*

Because social exclusion is multi-dimensional, solutions to the problem must necessarily be wide ranging. Percy-Smith (2000) stresses the ‘*need for holistic joined-up partnership and multi-agency responses*’ (p.17) to address the issues.

As the nature of social exclusion may change according to time and circumstances, it is impossible to define it absolutely. However, the government (DETR, 2000) compiled Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) to list all English wards in rank of deprivation. The IMD are a set of 33 indicators, organised under six themes of income; employment; health and disability; education, skills and training; housing and geographical access to services, each representing different forms of deprivation. The indices enable deprivation to be mapped more accurately and allow areas to be ranked according to their level of deprivation. The IMD were used as a means of selecting an area of disadvantage for this study.

Among the findings of Page’s (2000) research on three large council estates was that there is strong evidence of the linkage between negative aspects of disadvantage, such as poor educational achievement, crime and family breakdown (p. 1). Also interesting in light of the present study is the finding that although those vulnerable to social exclusion might be in the minority, their norms and values tend to dominate the culture of a whole community and the way it was viewed locally – this was certainly the researcher’s experience. Most respondents in Page’s research were:

*... content with where they lived and spent much of their time close to home. Their main concerns were getting by from day to day. Estate life was important because it occupied such a large part of their lives and provided most of their social contacts. They did not perceive high rates of joblessness*

*... as significant ... nor did they regard themselves as 'poor' or socially isolated. ... Most were well connected locally to supportive peer networks (p.2).*

Another helpful insight into disadvantaged communities emerged from Duffy (2000) who cited several commonalities, discovering that people:

- *... tend to be more reliant on public services...*
- *... place more complex and intense demands on public services...*
- *... healthcare is made more difficult by poor diets, the stress of unemployment and poverty...*
- *... are less likely to have Internet access, and they are three times as likely to have no telephone.*
- *... a wider problem of greater mistrust of public services ... due to the nature of the relationship between residents and public bodies (p. 2-3).*

It was essential and informative to explore concepts of social exclusion before embarking on a research project that involved working with a community of people labelled disadvantaged and socially excluded according to current measures of deprivation.

## 2.5 Chapter summary

*This section explored common interpretations of the key concepts underpinning the study along with the researcher's interpretation of the concepts as applied within the bounds of the study. The three key concepts, stemming from the research question, were information, disadvantage and community. The concepts of information and information behaviour have caused much discussion and debate, and information in particular remains a contentious issue. No attempt was made to give definitive representations of the terms; the intent was to provide a starting point for exploring the terms within the small worlds of a specific disadvantaged community. It was important for the researcher to prepare for the fieldwork experience by finding out, albeit in a theoretical way, what life might be like in a disadvantaged community by exploring concepts of disadvantage and community. The following chapter explores past research in the area of information behaviour, with a focus on disadvantaged people and communities.*

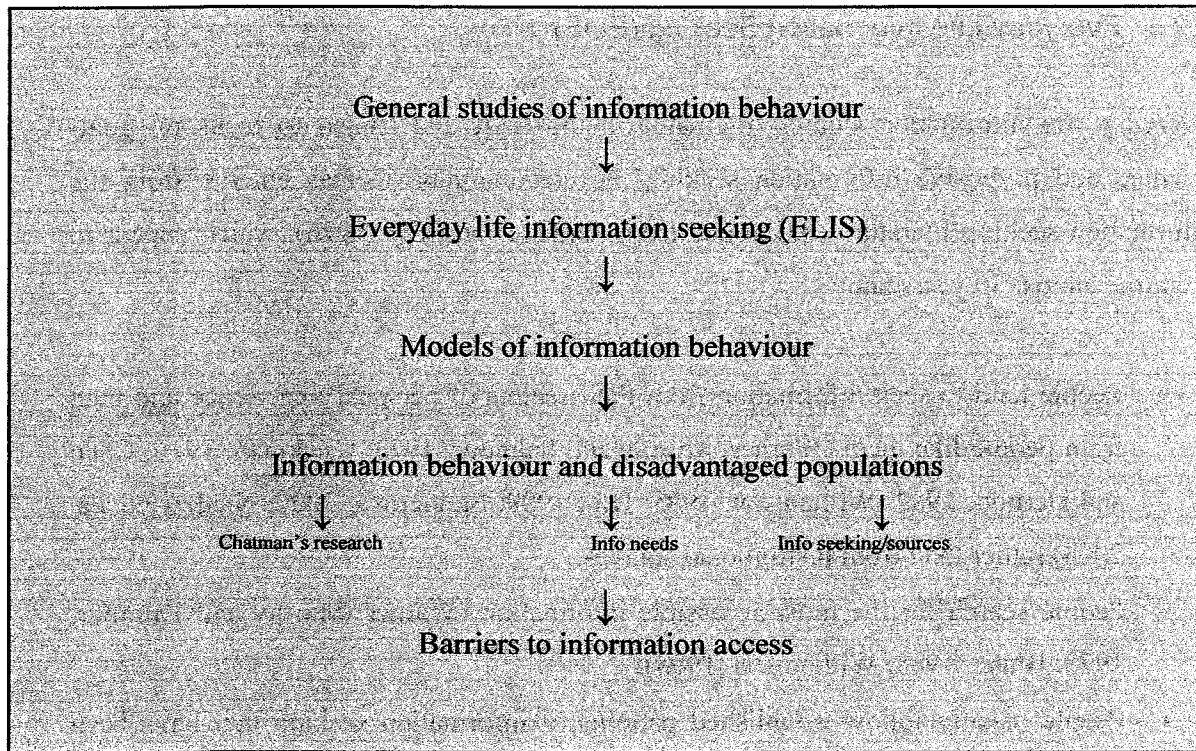
### 3 Review of relevant literature

#### 3.1 Introduction

An exploration of the information behaviour of a community of 'disadvantaged' people forms the substance of this research. Many factors affect the ways people react to a want or a need for information or help, including cultural differences, personal attitudes, social behaviour and environment. Because of the nature of these factors, a multi-disciplinary approach to information behaviour has evolved. The fields of communication studies, sociology, psychology, politics and education have a role to play in information research (see also Wilson and Walsh, 1996).

Looking for information, suggests Kuhlthau (1993b), '*is a primary activity of life*' (p.14), and a tradition of research dates back to the 1950s when researchers began to explore the information needs of academics and professionals during the course of their work. Although there has been some research into the information behaviour of disadvantaged groups in the USA, there has been little in the UK. This paucity of UK-based research, along with the current political emphasis on social exclusion and access to information, has resulted in a call for such research by academics such as Muddiman et al (2000c), who observe that '*the information needs of many social classes and groups remain only dimly perceived*' (p.185). Alongside this, Julien and Michels (2000) call for research attention to focus on '*people's daily life information behaviour*' (p.9) and '*the affective factors that mediate people's interaction with information resources*' (p.9).

This chapter explores information behaviour research, beginning with a brief exploration of general studies of information behaviour and moving to everyday life information seeking. Existing models of information behaviour are then considered before specific information needs and seeking studies of disadvantaged people are examined to situate the present study within an established theoretical framework. Chatman's work is explored in depth for three reasons: she focused on the subject for over 20 years, her work remains the most widely cited within the canon and her methodology was useful in terms of developing the present study. Previous studies examining barriers to information seeking constitute the final consideration in this section. Figure 5 depicts the development of the literature review.



**Figure 5 The development of the literature review**

### 3.2 General studies of information behaviour

Before examining research into specific disadvantaged or marginalised populations, it is useful to look at general studies of everyday information behaviour in order to trace the development of the research. Over the past 30 or so years, there has been considerable research into the information behaviour of many populations in society, ranging from software engineers (Hertzum, 2001), to managers (Kirk, 1996), to job-seekers (Williamson, 1998), to university students (Eskola, 1998) and to feminist booksellers (Burnett, Besant and Chatman, 2001). In addition, a good deal of research has focused on health-related information seeking (Gorman, 1995; Pettigrew, 1998; Urquhart, 1998). At the same time there has been a shift away from a systems-based perspective towards a more holistic one that focuses on the person in context. There have also been steps towards regarding information seeking not just as active and goal-oriented but also as an ongoing process incorporated into everyday life.



### 3.2.1 Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS)

Everyday life information studies originated in the USA and tended to focus on goal-oriented and purposive information seeking. Several common themes emerge from the information seeking literature (developed from Faibisoff and Ely, 1976), which appear to hold true almost 30 years later:

- People tend to seek information from their realms of personal experience and then from people like them (Warner, Murray and Palmour, 1973; Crickman, 1976; Chen and Hernon, 1982; Williamson, 1995; Hill, 1999; Steinerova, 2000; Niedzwiedzka, 2003) rather than from institutional sources.
- People search for the most accessible information (Warner, Murray and Palmour, 1973; Blake, 1988; Williamson, 1995).
- People usually follow established patterns of information seeking that have been successful for them previously (Chen and Hernon, 1982).
- Information seeking can be incidental (Spink and Cole, 2001; Williamson, 1995).
- Word of mouth is the primary method of information seeking (Chen and Hernon, 1982; Marcella and Baxter, 2001).
- People seek help and information from trusted sources (Chen and Hernon, 1982; Chatman, 1985, 1990; Harris and Dewdney, 1994).
- Affective support and understanding are important in information seeking (Chen and Hernon, 1982; Dervin et al, 1976; Harris, 1988; Savolainen, 1995a, 1995b).
- People are often unaware of more formal services and information sources that can help them (Childers, 1975; Dervin et al, 1976; Harris and Dewdney, 1994).
- Information needs in everyday life are generally based around health, finances, housing and family (Warner, Murray and Palmour, 1973; Childers, 1975; Chen and Hernon, 1982).

The first general study of everyday information behaviour was Warner, Murray and Palmour's 1973 study, which explored the information needs of citizens. Dervin (1976) highlights an important finding from such generalised studies: '*an individual may not be aware of his information needs, or he may not be able to verbalize them. Or he may be aware of his needs, but not see them as 'information' problems*' (p. 28), and proposes that

*'huge gaps exist in the knowledge base relating to average citizens and their information needs'* (p. 35). These first studies imposed a coding scheme for specific information need categories such as housing, family and health. They also commonly avoided the word *information* preferring a more open interpretation to allow research participants to include all information sources rather than just formal ones. Chen and Hernon (1982) later completed studies into everyday information needs and also avoided the word *information*, asking participants to describe situations in which they need to find an answer to a question (p. 25). The first studies were also large-scale, involving upwards of 500 people, and used quantitative data analysis. As Dervin and Nilan (1986) note, the importance of these studies was *'that they go outside the bounds of system intersection to assess need situations'* (p.21). Relatively few studies have explored everyday information needs from this perspective in the interim.

The only large-scale study into everyday information needs in the UK is Marcella and Baxter's (2000), taken from a citizenship information perspective. They used a variety of methods, including surveys, case studies and focus groups, to investigate citizenship information that *'help[s] people overcome the problems that occur in day-to-day life'* (p.66). The topics most frequently cited are education, leisure, employment, transport and travel, legal concerns, health care and welfare issues, and the preferred channel was face-to-face.

Smaller-scale studies have taken place such as Savolainen's (1995a) research in Finland concerning non-work information needs and seeking in everyday life. He sought to add to this relatively unexplored area by looking at information seeking in the context of way of life, driven by an interest in *'the cognitive, cultural and social characteristics of information seekers'* (p.314). Savolainen's concept of *Everyday Life Information Seeking* (ELIS) describes two types of information: orienting information, which people use to monitor their daily lives, and practical information, which people use to solve problems. Savolainen believes that context is influential, and importantly, although perhaps logically, he discovered that people make decisions based on the limits of their competence and experience. In order to take into account situational and contextual factors, Savolainen urges that *'more holistic research frameworks'* (ibid, p.330) are needed.

Spink and Cole (2001) concur and suggest that context in everyday information behaviour is important since not all information behaviour stems from a perceived gap. They consider a wider perspective should be sought in which achieving *'a sense of*

*coherence may not involve any information seeking at all* (p.302). The authors appear to mean that in ELIS, information behaviour does not necessarily result from some missing component but is assimilated into everyday life, like information encountering or information gathering. It is intuitive rather than systematic.

Williamson's (1995) study of older people's information needs was underpinned by a similar premise: not all information seeking is purposeful or active, a practice she describes as '*incidental information acquisition*' (p.23). Findings from her research indicate that although everyday life information is sometimes sought purposefully, it is more likely to crop up incidentally in conversation with family and friends. The respondents' information needs reflect their everyday lives, focusing on health, financial and recreation issues. The information sources most likely to be used were family members, friends, television, print media and radio. Williamson concluded, '*with everyday life information, the notion of people 'being informed' rather than 'seeking information' is often appropriate*' (ibid, p.347). This is an important move away from concepts of uncertainty, gaps and anomalous states of knowledge towards a belief that information is ubiquitous and assimilated unconsciously into everyday life.

One of the outcomes of previous research was the development of models of information seeking behaviour, which are discussed in the following section.

### 3.3 Models of information seeking behaviour

Current models of information behaviour and information seeking behaviour tend to focus on active information seeking; however, Wilson's (Wilson and Walsh, 1996) most recent model includes more passive information behaviour. Many empirically based models of information behaviour focus on people within a professional setting, such as managers, or within the academic world including, school children. These models are invaluable in exploring active, systematic and purposeful information seeking, but are not readily transferable to other environments, particularly those experienced by people living in poverty in disadvantaged areas.

A model of information seeking behaviour is a visual representation of the theoretical or empirical concepts underpinning some or all aspects of information behaviour. Models of information seeking suggest a sequence of events taken by individuals in their attempts to find information. There are many well-known models of

information seeking behaviour, notably those of Wilson (1981, Wilson and Walsh, 1996), Dervin (1983), Kuhlthau (1993a), and Ellis (1993) that map the process of information seeking.

Wilson's (1981) first model demonstrates general information seeking behaviour and includes the concepts of information need, information exchange and information use. It is based upon two main propositions: (1) that information need is a secondary need arising from a primary more basic need and that (2) barriers to information will likely be encountered. Wilson defines the basic needs that provoke information seeking as physiological, cognitive or affective (p.7). He further places information behaviour into a contextual framework that includes the personal, the social and the environmental. Wilson's (Wilson and Walsh, 1996) later model is a major revision of his earlier one, retaining the framework of person-in-context, but introducing 'intervening variables' that may be supportive or preventive. His model moves away from a systems-based approach to one that is 'user' based and recognises the user's context as playing a major role in information behaviour. Although Wilson's model has value, it is a theoretical model synthesised from the literature and is not based on empirical research, and as with other models, begins from a recognised problem situation.

Dervin's work has been extremely influential in the human issues of information behaviour and, like Wilson's, her model stems from a situation in which there is a cognitive gap. Dervin's (1983) sense-making model focuses on how people make sense of their worlds and how they use information in the process. She argues that information seeking happens when individuals are stopped in a situation in which their internal sense of what to do next has run out. The situational aspects of information needs are crucial to this concept. To represent this gap in knowledge, Dervin developed the *situation → gap → outcome → bridge* model. Dervin describes the model as follows:

*The 'sense-maker' is stopped in a situation. Movement is prevented by some kind of gap (operationalised for information-need situations as a question or question-set). The sense-maker is seen as potentially making some kind of use of whatever bridge is built across the gap the user faces (p.21).*

From her studies of high school students' information seeking, Kuhlthau (1991) developed a six-stage process model of *Initiation, Selection, Exploration, Formulation, Collection* and *Presentation*, associating each stage with specific actions and emotions. Kuhlthau's model incorporates the realms of the affective, the cognitive and the physical in

what she terms the '*information search process*' (p.366). Kuhlthau is particularly interested in the affective aspects of information behaviour and argues that '*information seeking may be viewed as a process of construction in which users progress from uncertainty to understanding*' (p.345). She takes uncertainty to be '*a cognitive state which commonly causes affective symptoms of anxiety and lack of confidence*' (p.347) and suggests that this is a common occurrence in the early stages of information seeking. During successful information seeking, the individual moves from a state of uncertainty to one of understanding and confidence. Her information search process model and uncertainty principle highlight the importance of seeing information behaviour as a recursive process as well as noting the influence of affective dimensions on human information behaviour. However, like other models, information behaviour is precipitated by a problem situation that is resolved by active information seeking.

Ellis's (1993) model was based on empirical research with researchers in various academic disciplines, and he formulated eight characteristics of active information seeking behaviour similar to Kuhlthau's, as follows:

- Starting* – beginning to seek
- Chaining* – following footnotes and references
- Browsing* – semi-structured searching
- Differentiating* – filtering information
- Monitoring* – keeping up-to-date
- Extracting* – selecting relevant material
- Verifying* – checking accuracy
- Ending* – finishing the search (p.482)

He discovered that different academic researchers used different combinations of the characteristics although they represented fundamentally the same activities. While this is a valuable model for information behaviour within a specific context, its findings may not be transferable to a disadvantaged context. Ellis's model begins with an identified need for information and a willingness and ability to search for it; it does not include any affective elements.

Allen's (1996) model stresses the salience of contextual factors in information seeking behaviour. In his person-in-situation model (ibid, p.119), Allen proposes that given an identical situation, two people will necessarily experience different information needs as

their past experiences are different (ibid, p.113). Personal and social factors constrain or enhance individual or group behaviour. Allen maintains that:

*a unified and coherent understanding of information needs can only be obtained as researchers consider the problem situations that give rise to needs, and the information seeking behaviours that resolve those needs, in terms of interactions between personal and situations variables (ibid, p.121).*

Johnson's (1997) model, the 'Comprehensive Model of Information Seeking' (CMIS), was developed in relation to health information seeking, specifically avoidance of information in cancer patients, and he similarly proposes context as an important dimension. His model explores motivations for information seeking, albeit in an area in which, he suggests, information might well be avoided. He posits four factors – demographics, experience, salience and beliefs – which motivate a person to seek information. The first two factors relate to direct experience, for example, the person with cancer might know another who has had cancer. The latter relate to personal relevance, including fear, denial, and avoidance or ignoring of information. Both these factors take into account a person's knowledge of a topic, and may also be de-motivating. Johnson believes that sometimes a person '*consciously knows that a problem exists, but chooses not to confront it*' (p.56). His model is important as it focuses on the situation behind information behaviour albeit in a very specific context.

Anders (2001) formulates a social model of information behaviour in which information seeking can be initiated at several points. Anders' model is empirically based on his research into information seeking and the Internet. Again, there are limitations in the usefulness of this model for the present study, because the context is different, but there are transferable concepts. For example, Anders suggests that information seeking may involve active information seeking as well as information gathering, communicating or giving. Rather restrictively for other research perhaps, he sees information sources in terms of either people or systems. Anders further suggests 'information use' as a component of his model, stating that people have a choice when they find information: to continue, to deflect, to postpone or to accept. His model shows information behaviour as often being an iterative process.

The majority of these models suggest the need to take into account cognitive, affective and contextual aspects of information behaviour and to view information seeking behaviour as a process, which may at times be iterative. A common theme is that

information seeking is purposeful and precipitated by a situation that impels the individual to search actively for information. None of these models accounts for the serendipitous nature of information acquisition or explores barriers to information behaviour, merely mentioning them as factors. Furthermore, although many of the models depict information seeking within specific contexts and situations, such as academic, school or health related areas, none explores information behaviour in an everyday or disadvantaged setting.

However, McKenzie's (2002) model of information practices in everyday life attempts to remedy this situation. She proposes that *'a focus on the social concept of information practices is more appropriate to everyday life information seeking than the psychological concept of information behaviour'* (p.19). Her model takes into account information behaviour that may be systematic or idiosyncratic and that involves four modes of *active seeking, active scanning, non-directed monitoring* and *by proxy* to include all methods of acquiring information, including active, passive and via another agent (p.26). McKenzie stresses that her model is context-bound and tentative; although this may be true, the model takes into account the muddled reality of information behaviour and develops from previous models.

Niedzwiedzka (2003) offers a general model of information behaviour that is empirically based, which progresses from Wilson's 1996 theoretical model. She points out many weaknesses in Wilson's model, which she used as a conceptual framework for her own study into health managers' information behaviour. Niedzwiedzka's new model applies to a wider range of information users, and she makes several important points:

- Wilson separates context from intervening variables in his model. Niedzwiedzka questions the necessity of this as she believes *'these variables, after all, form the context of information behaviour'*.
- Wilson also separates demographic and psychological variables. Niedzwiedzka argues that they can all be sub-categorised as *'personal variables'*.
- Niedzwiedzka questions the presence of intervening variables only at the stage of information acquisition. She believes they are present *'at the stages of need occurrence, decision-making, processing and use'*.
- In the new model, *'the totality of information behaviour is submerged in a context'* (online).

Although Niedzwiedzka acknowledges that the model is '*far from perfection and completeness*' and it does not incorporate the '*crossroads and loops*' and messiness or the passive aspects of information behaviour embodied in McKenzie's model, it is a step forward and gives food for thought. Nonetheless, as Julien and Michels (2000) suggest, more research is needed to develop new models since, '*models of information behaviour based primarily on studies of elite information users ... are necessarily restricted in their theoretical validity and in their practical utility*' (p.9).

As research into everyday information behaviour in working life and in everyday life evolved, new studies emerged that explored the topic from another perspective: that of the disadvantaged person within his or her community.

### 3.4 Information behaviour in disadvantaged populations

Although there have been several studies (Childers, 1975; Blake, 1988; Harris, 1988; Bishop et al, 1999; Spink and Cole, 2001) into information behaviour within disadvantaged and marginalised contexts, few (Chatman 1985, 1987, 1992; Hersberger, 1998) have taken an ethnographic approach. The studies took place in the USA and Canada; no similar studies have been published in the UK, and there remains a lack of awareness of the information behaviour of many groups in UK society, in particular those who are disadvantaged or marginalised in some way.

Information plays a crucial role in helping individuals and communities become autonomous, responsible and productive. The National Working Party on Social Inclusion (INSINC) (1997) stresses the need to strengthen people's information skills, particularly those on low incomes and the unemployed, to prevent them from becoming even more marginalized. It emphasises that information acquisition is not a straightforward process and identified three distinct steps:

- *information awareness: the ability to recognise that what may be needed in a given situation is information;*
- *information access; and*
- *the ability to exploit information once it has been acquired* (p.21).

The focus, although dealing with important concerns, seems to be on purposive information seeking to resolve specific problems using information systems rather than a more holistic exploration of information in everyday life. In some ways, it puts the cart before the horse



and does not attempt to look first at what information means to specific groups of people and how information is presently assimilated into their lives. Information providers need to examine specific situations *'to obtain a better sense of how social systems in general both define and are defined by information behaviour'* (Burnett, Besant and Chatman, 2001: 546).

An exploration of past research into the information behaviour of marginalised and disadvantaged people follows, focusing initially on Chatman's research and then exploring other studies of information needs and seeking.

### 3.4.1 Chatman's research

In terms of the research topic and the methodological approach, Chatman's work was an inspiration. Her work, spanning more than 20 years, focused on the information worlds of the poor and the disenfranchised in America, and she was among the first to investigate the information worlds of low-income populations, an area that had, until the early 1980s, received minimal scholarly attention. Chatman used ethnographic methods such as extended observation and in-depth interviews to reveal the information worlds – social interactions, cultural norms, contextual meanings and information behaviour – of people living in a variety of disenfranchised and marginalised communities. She chose these methods as she believed there was little knowledge about *'everyday perspectives and ordinary uses of information'* (1992: 3) and felt that ethnographic approaches would prove useful in gaining an emic perspective. In looking at the information worlds of the low-skilled, the working poor, women prisoners, elderly women and others, she contributed to a *'better appreciation of practical information and its application to people's everyday lives'* (1987: 266). Chatman (1990) recognises that trust and a safe environment are crucial to information behaviour, and these strands weave through her research findings. Two important concepts underpin her work and were important to the present study: information poverty and small world lives.

Chatman contributed enormously to an understanding of the field of information poverty. She used several theories to explain the concept, including gratification and coping theories. Chatman (ibid) sought to investigate why disadvantaged people do not use sources of information that are potentially valuable to them and applied gratification theory, which emphasises the role of luck in the resolution of a problem. A sense of fatalism perhaps

explains why there is no real attempt made to search out information, as well as a 'what's-the-point attitude' as people see themselves as unable to improve their lives. Chatman's use of 'gratification' theory developed from the realisation that *'certain populations live in an environment in which the emphasis is on immediate gratification and satisfaction of needs'* (p.438) because *'their reality is so time-bound, so situational in its immediacy'* (p.447). An information poor lifestyle tends to focus on the present rather than on the future.

Chatman (ibid) suggests that these findings imply a need *'to increase our knowledge of information steeped in everyday reality, its perceptions by specialized populations, and what we will need to accomplish to provide that information in its most accessible and useable format'* (p.447-448). For this reason, it is imperative that information professionals increase their knowledge of information bound in the everyday reality of disadvantaged lives and provide information in an accessible and useable format.

Chatman (1992) applies a second theory, coping theory, to explain information poverty in her study set in a retirement community. In it, she documents the search for and use of coping information by elderly women. Chatman uses social network theory to track coping information and determined that many women felt isolated and did not share critical information about health problems as they were afraid of a negative outcome: being removed from the community into a nursing home. Chatman concludes that *'a social support system must exist before persons will engage in an interpersonal process of sharing information'* (ibid, p.1).

In a later study, Chatman and Pendleton (1995) continue addressing the issues of information behaviour within an information poor life-style. This paper reiterates the question of why poor people do not access the many sources of information available to them. Their conclusions led to a theory of 'alienation' within an information environment and suggest that a knowledge gap occurs because of the influence of their life worlds and their social networks. The role of mass media (except as a means of entertainment) is irrelevant to the everyday concerns of poor people, and poor people mistrust *'sources that originate outside their information environment'* (p.142). Perhaps, as Chatman suggests, information poverty applies to knowledge or information that originates outside lived experiences. But is it possible to bridge the gap? Chatman proposes (from the perspective of the public library as information provider) that simply responding to enquiries is not enough. A more proactive role is called for – one in which not only the information, but the

information provider, is introduced as *'trustworthy, reliable and useful to their situation'* (p.143).

Chatman (1996a) reflects on her previous research to try to explain unresolved issues and outlines four concepts – risk-taking, secrecy, deception and situational relevance – that she believes define an impoverished life world. Chatman theorises that the information poor are 'insiders' and live in social networks devoid of critical information; they also perceive themselves as lacking sources that might help them. 'Insiders' would not consider looking for information in the world of 'outsiders', as it is alien to their social networks; Chatman further (1999) suggests that for the information poor, *'unless a critical problem arises, there is no point in seeking information'* (p.214).

A second important concept, 'small world lives' (Pendleton and Chatman, 1998), seeks to understand the social norms and the social reality of a community in order to understand its information behaviour. The authors suggest that deprived communities may share the same 'Weltanschauung' or way of looking at the world and that individuals within those communities have localised and specific information needs and sources. For example, people commonly choose not to be informed about the things that the larger social world deems important. As a result, Pendleton and Chatman suggest that *'it is also difficult, if not impossible, to respond to information needs if we do not have a clear understanding of the situations that generated those needs'* (ibid, p.733). Clearly, the authors propose a thorough understanding of community life is necessary in order to determine information needs.

The idea of life in a 'small world', where location and context are significant and life is outside of the 'norm', is an intriguing one and it supports the proposition that an individual's reality is socially constructed. Chatman (1999) is *'convinced that [this] holds a key to what kinds of information are conveyed and what information is withheld'* (p.210). This leads to her theory of 'life in the round', a complicated theory based around a set of six propositions, one of which was relevant to this study:

*Proposition 5: Members who live in the round will not cross the boundaries of their world to seek information* (ibid, p.214).

Although it could be said that we all live life in the round as we all inhabit a community of some colour, Chatman argues that life in the round within a disadvantaged community has a negative effect on everyday information seeking, as *'people will not search for information if there is no need to do so. If members of a social world choose to ignore*

*information, it is because their world is working without it* (ibid, p.214). Chatman adds a further conditional proposition in which she concedes that if the information is critical then an information seeking strategy that crosses the social boundary may be initiated. Generally, within a small world, people see their world as local and familiar, and their primary source of information is family and friends, so that information is acquired based on local experiences and situations. People outside familiar surroundings are viewed with suspicion and mistrust. However, Chatman (1992) suggests that in 'small worlds,' individuals do not always see others within their world as trustworthy, and so they do not risk exposing what they perceive as weaknesses by asking for or offering information. The studies of janitors and older women confirm that other members of their world are not necessarily seen as trustworthy, and so information is not shared among them. This finding is important as it challenges a central argument in studies of everyday lives: that people share important information with family, neighbours and friends. However, within the two studies mentioned, it should be noted that specific information is not shared – job information and health concerns respectively – since sharing it is potentially threatening at a personal level.

Chatman has added enormously to our understanding of information behaviour within complex disadvantaged lifestyles. She has contributed to both methodological and theoretical issues in an area about which comparatively little is known, demonstrating that ethnographic methods can help elicit the ways in which cultural and social norms affect information behaviour.

### 3.4.2 Information needs

Information needs are often complex and necessarily contextual, arising out of everyday life. Uncovering information needs is often difficult in disadvantaged populations because, as Dunne (2002) explains, '*... the problem is multifaceted, and includes financial, legal, medical, psychological, and emotional aspects*' (p.353).

Much past research has used a framework of information need categories to elicit information needs in specific areas. Childers (1975) examined the information needs of the information poor in America and asked research participants about their information needs in 11 specific topic areas: health, home and family, consumer issues, housing, employment, welfare, law, the political process, transport, education and recreation (p.44-77). According

to Childers there are two types of information need: kinetic and potential. Kinetic needs stem from situational aspects, which may change and can be crisis or non-crisis needs. Potential needs can be unconscious and therefore not acted upon. For the disadvantaged individual, Childers suggests, information needs tend to be kinetic and in the form of coping needs. People need help coping with everyday issues.

Spink et al (1998) also used a topic framework to determine the information needs of 300 African-American heads of household living in a low-income housing development and surmised that *'the primary focus ...was a need to know about what affects them directly, such as family events and local activities'* (p.379). Relating to the same study, Spink and Cole (2001) further suggest that information needs represent *'the challenges of day-to-day existence'* (p.13) and *'are shaped within a larger social context'* (p.8). Everyday life shapes and affects information needs as well as information behaviour.

Another study of the information needs of low-income African-Americans (Bishop et al, 1999) found that participants needed information on community services and activities, resources for children, healthcare, education, employment, crime and safety and general reference tools. Again, these are real-life issues and problems and a pattern of similar types of information needs is evident.

Pienaar's (1995) study explores information needs in disadvantaged communities in South Africa and proposes that survival information is needed most, that is, information to cope with health, housing, income and citizenship problems, etc., and she stresses that it is *'vital that each disadvantaged community be assessed individually'* and that *'articulated, as well as unarticulated information needs have to be monitored'* (ibid, p.16).

A situational perspective is generally accepted as the best way of determining information needs within disadvantaged communities. In her study of abused women, Harris (1988) declares that *'information need should be defined from the perspective of the individual'* (p.63); in a later study, Harris et al (2001) discover that the women need help and information about protection, safe shelter, managing their situations, medical assistance and legal issues. The women's needs are more specifically related to their life situations.

Hersberger (2001b) examines the everyday information needs of homeless parents adopting Dervin's (1976) framework of topic cues and categorising information needs into the principal problem areas of: finances, child-care and relationships, housing, health, employment, education, transport, public assistance and shelter; she surmises that *'everyday life for homeless parents is complex and messy'* (p.132). An important finding

from Hersberger's (1998) study is that '*many of the problems of homeless parents are interlinked ... while a primary problem area is articulated, there are various ... sub-problems that need addressing*' (p.251). Homeless parents rely on social networks rather than systems to help them with their information problems.

Bates (2004) is currently undertaking a PhD that '*examines the everyday information needs of citizens in relation to public information ... their information seeking behaviour ... and their attitudes and perceptions of public information provision*' (p.22). Bates uses the 'random walk technique' method to select participants and collected data via narrative interviews. No findings are currently available.

In disadvantaged populations, information needs stem from everyday life problems and issues and, despite the diverse contexts, needs appear to be similar, including health, finances, safety and housing.

### 3.4.3 Information seeking and sources

Information needs often lead to some form of information seeking, an area which has been described as '*an important and emerging area of interdisciplinary information research*' (Spink, 1999: 371). Information seeking can be directed and purposeful or undirected and non-specific (Williamson, 1995 (see also section 3.2.1); Sonnenwald, 1998), and information sources are usually classified as either formal, via institutions, or informal, via social networks. In the information seeking literature generally, several distinctions (see also section 2.2.2) have been made between purposeful and non-purposeful information seeking (Bates, 1989; Williamson, 1995; Wilson and Walsh, 1996; Erdelez, 1999; McKenzie, 2002).

Information seeking and information sources usually go hand-in-hand, and studies have shown that a preference for human sources is a common characteristic of information seeking, particularly in disadvantaged situations (Beal, 1979; Hersberger, 1998). Spink et al (1998) propose two types of information channel, formal (library staff and newspapers) and informal (friends and family). Their research findings indicate that the latter channel is most widely used by low-income people. Dudley (2000) suggests that informal social channels may also occur in environments where information is exchanged such as at the pub or outside the school gates.

Greenberg and Dervin (1970) likewise determine that inter-personal networks centring on immediate family and friends were most common and that *'gossip is the prime activity of the low-income communication network'* (p.116), suggesting that everyday conversations are also forms of information seeking. Warner, Murray and Palmour's (1973) study also reveals that conversations with friends or colleagues are the most accessible ways of finding information. Chen and Hernon (1982) maintain that their respondents favour interpersonal information providers because they are *'open, unstructured, and readily available'* (p.63). Other studies suggest that although inter-personal providers are neither necessarily highly qualified nor suitable, they are the most available, accessible, trustworthy and approachable, and more formal sources such as libraries are viewed as secondary and unimportant (Warner, Murray and Palmour, 1973; Chatman, 1985; Harris and Dewdney, 1994). Chen and Hernon further suggest that those who earn less, leave school early and reside within a small location are most unable to articulate their information needs.

Accessibility emerges as an important finding in Choo's (2000) study. He believes that several factors influence choice and use of information sources, including time and effort, and they can be grouped as *'perceived source accessibility'* (p.248). Krikelas (1983) proposes a hierarchy of information sources, which *'represent[s] some basic concept of minimal effort'* (p.16). This is not necessarily a negative trait, but simply a fact of human nature. A knowledgeable person known to the individual is the preferred source, followed by someone knowledgeable working in an institution, and the final option is an impersonal source, such as a book.

Spink et al's (1998) study into the information seeking and information needs of low-income African Americans in Texas finds that people are likely to ask family, friends and neighbours about most problems, although they are likely to ask the family physician before family members about health information, and to use newspapers for job information (p.372). Residents' primary focus is a need to know about things that affect them directly such as everyday real-life issues like family and local activities.

Julien and Michels (2000) explore information sources in the context of daily life and similarly note the importance of direct personal contact in work and personal situations: *'people talk to people when they face a problem or issue in their daily lives'* (p.5). The reasons for this include convenience and information quality; however, compromises are made: a convenient source might not be selected if it is not seen as

reliable, useful or trustworthy (p.7). The authors also note the importance of '*friendly caring sources that leave the information seeker feeling respected*' (p.9). The affective dimension of information behaviour is an aspect that has received little research attention.

Overall, previous research demonstrated that the most popular information sources were informal human sources, via inter-personal networks such as family, friends and colleagues. The reasons for this are summarised in Figure 6 below.

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Previous studies citing this reason</b>
<i>Accessibility</i>	Warner, Murray and Palmour (1973); Chatman (1985); Harris and Dewdney (1994); Choo (2000); Julien and Michels (2000)
<i>Approachability</i>	Warner, Murray and Palmour (1973) Chatman (1985), Harris and Dewdney (1994)
<i>Availability</i>	Warner, Murray and Palmour (1973); Chatman (1985); Harris and Dewdney (1994); Julien and Michels (2000)
<i>Convenience</i>	Krikelas (1983); Choo (2000); Julien and Michels (2000); Fisher et al, 2005
<i>Friendliness &amp; caring</i>	Julien and Michels (2000); Fisher et al, (2005)
<i>Reliability</i>	Julien and Michels (2000); Fisher et al (2005)
<i>Time</i>	Choo (2000)
<i>Trustworthiness</i>	Warner, Murray and Palmour (1973); Chatman (1985); Harris and Dewdney (1994); Julien and Michels (2000)

**Figure 6 Factors affecting choice of information source across different studies**

These studies combine to suggest the importance of informal personal networks for information seeking and to imply that more formal information sources are used seldom because of the barriers they present.

### 3.5 Barriers to information access

As individuals make their way through their personal environments, they encounter issues or problems that may result in a search for help and information; in doing this, they often face barriers. They may face educational barriers such as poor literacy, practical barriers such as a lack of information gathering skills, or cost barriers such as not being able to afford the bus fare to resource centres. Several studies explore information access and barriers in terms of electronic information (Clement and Shade, 1996; Pickard, 1998; Arunachalam, 1998; Craven, 2003) or from the perspective of gender (Poston-Anderson



and Edwards, 1993; Burdick, 1996). There have been some studies of barriers from a disadvantaged perspective in the UK (Hull and Ritchie, 1999; Muddiman et al, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; DCMS, 2001; Vincent, 2002), but they take an information provider perspective and not that of a person-in-context. Again, most of this type of research has been carried out in North America.

Within the culture of poverty there are many barriers to information access (Childers, 1975), including poor language processing skills such as literacy problems and poor communication skills. Furthermore, people may live in an '*information ghetto*' (ibid, p.32) and are often '*locked into an information network that is deficient in the information that is ordinarily available to the rest of society*' (p.42-43), while simultaneously rich in internally-generated information. An individual's everyday environment is a barrier for the typical information poor, who '*does not see his problems as information needs ... [and] is not a very active information seeker*' (p.43)

Similarly, Chen and Hernon (1982) believe environment is a barrier to information access and they categorise five types of barrier from their research, shown in Figure 7.

Type of barrier	Example
<i>societal</i>	social class, cultural differences
<i>institutional</i>	the information provider is unable to or unwilling to provide appropriate information or the person might not know that the information exists.
<i>physical</i>	distance
<i>psychological</i>	an individual may not see needs as information-related or may lack confidence
<i>intellectual</i>	the person may lack the required information seeking skills (p.18)

**Figure 7 Barriers to information access (Chen and Hernon, 1982)**

Others identify identical (Dervin, 1976) or similar types of barriers, which do not appear to have changed over the past 30 years. The DCMS (1999) suggests four barriers (to public library use): institutional, personal and social, perceptions and awareness, and

environmental, which are almost identical to Childers'. Likewise, Wilson and Walsh (1996) propose eight non-specific barriers, which apply to any individual in an information seeking situation, and which he labels *intervening variables*: personal characteristics, emotional variables, educational variables, demographic variables, social/interpersonal variables, environmental variables, economic variables and source characteristics. Some of these categories could be subsumed; for example, emotional variables are also personal characteristics. The use of various categories is somewhat useful but also confusing, since there seems to be an element of blame of the individual, who is perhaps poor, afraid or illiterate, for their inability to use the system.

Harris and Dewdney (1994) explore abused women's help seeking and take a person-centred approach to summarising the main obstacles to finding information in everyday life, which is in some ways more helpful than attempts to categorise the barriers, as it explores barriers from where the person is. There are concurrences with other research, and their list is useful as it describes basic problems leading to barriers to information access:

- *not knowing what information you need,*
- *not knowing where to find it,*
- *not knowing what sources of information are available,*
- *finding that no source exists for the particular information need,*
- *poor communication skills,*
- *low self-confidence,*
- *disappointment in sources, delays,*
- *inaccurate or inappropriate information. (p.36-39).*

Of these barriers, at least three appear to be the responsibility of the service provider. Even though few abused women used library services to resolve their problems, Harris et al (2001) maintain that '*library and information specialists can provide some of the glue necessary to bind the service networks together*' (p. 135) since they know how to locate and provide information.

Language issues are significant barriers in several other studies. Mehra, Bishop and Bazzell (2000) sought to determine community health information needs, and they conclude that the complex language of much formal information is a major barrier, citing a

*'lack of accessible information, in other words, information that is convenient, jargon-free, relevant and culturally appropriate' (p.3).*

Social class and insularity are further barriers. Insularity, which includes concepts of trust and the 'outsider', is a considerable barrier to information access, suggests Agada (1999). In his study into the use of inner-city gatekeepers for information seeking, he notes that perceptions together with complex personal information need situations also create barriers,

*... to information access and problem resolution. As was evident among the gatekeepers in this study, lack of awareness of appropriate information sources may be traced to perceived irrelevance or distrust of information from sources considered to be in the service of 'outsiders.' This further compounds the personal nature of the everyday needs ... Few information or service agencies could anticipate the range of personal needs experienced in this environment (p.82).*

Others, including Chatman (1996a), Pateman (2000a), Black and Crann (2000), also suggest that insularity and social class are major obstacles to information access. Marcella and Baxter (2000) note that *'social class and status can have a significant impact on many aspects of information need and patterns of information seeking behaviour' (p.251).*

Fisher et al's (2005) recent large-scale study explores the needs for health and human services of 612 urban-rural residents via a telephone survey and noted several factors that *enabled* their respondents to access information. Among these factors are reliable information, convenient access, familiarity, understanding and provision of emotional support.

Barriers to information access include language and communication, insularity and environment, lack of confidence, social class, lack of information seeking skills and education. Some of these barriers are based in terms of a 'lack' on the part of the information seeker. These are unhelpful as they imply that the person is incongruent with the system, rather than the other way round. Many of the factors that enable access are of an affective nature, such as support and understanding, and are often innate personal skills.

### 3.6 Chapter summary

*The areas explored in this review of the literature place the present study within a specific theoretical and conceptual framework. This review traced the development of information*

*behaviour research from its inception in the early 70s when studies began to explore citizens' everyday life information needs to studies exploring information behaviour in a variety of work and everyday life situations. An offshoot of these studies has been the emergence of information studies exploring the lives of marginalised and disadvantaged people and an examination of the barriers they face in the search for help and information. Several models of information behaviour were scrutinised, none of which captures information behaviour in a disadvantaged situation.*

*Following this examination of the relevant literature, the next chapter outlines the methodological approach taken in the study and discusses the methods used.*

## 4 Methodology and methods

### 4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore the everyday information behaviour of people living in a 'disadvantaged' community, including how information behaviour was influenced by everyday life. This chapter describes the methodological approach taken in the study, sampling issues, the data collection methods used, the strategies for data analysis and the steps taken to ensure rigour in the research process. Following the generation of the research aims and objectives and the review of relevant literature, the research design developed from a preliminary framework.

### 4.2 Methodological framework

Research methods exist within a broader philosophical and theoretical framework: the methodology. Researchers make a commitment to a specific paradigm when they decide which methodology fits with their ontological and epistemological assumptions (Brewer, 2000: 28). Increasingly, Information Science researchers are using qualitative methodologies adapted from anthropology and sociology to study how people need, seek and use information (Fidel, 1993; Westbrook, 1994). The terms 'naturalistic inquiry', 'qualitative research', 'interpretive research' and 'constructivist inquiry' are often used synonymously to signify a paradigm that is human-centred, holistic and inductive.

The researcher's assumption is that an individual's reality is socially constructed and that a human-centred viewpoint is essential; thus a qualitative framework best suited to this study. As the intent was to explore information behaviour in people's everyday lives, as Guba and Lincoln (1989) state, '*the constructivist paradigm provides the best 'fit' whenever it is human enquiry that is being considered*' (p.82).

Contextual understanding of the community was crucial in this study since it is context – the everyday life of individuals – that gives rise to information behaviour. The importance of exploring context holistically within a naturalistic framework is articulated by many (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 237-238; Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 93-95; Patton, 1990: 40-41; Westbrook, 1994: 242; Brewer, 2000: 34-35). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggest that in qualitative research, context is important as '*human behaviour is significantly*

*influenced by the setting in which it occurs'* (p.29). The naturalistic paradigm is suited to research that aims to provide rich, context-specific information, which may then allow for broader patterns to be transferred to similar situations. The term *context*, Dervin (1997) feels, is an '*unruly beast... more often used, less often defined, and when defined, defined so variously*' (p.14). She argues that the struggle to define context is, to a degree, dependent on paradigmatic preference. At the positivist end of the continuum lies the belief that context is a type of container in which the phenomenon under study resides. At the post-positivist end, context forms the surroundings of human behaviour, which are inextricably linked to an understanding of human behaviour. Human information behaviour does not occur in a vacuum and must be seen holistically and in context.

The methodology of a research study should also fit the nature of the issues being explored. Wilson (1981, 2000) maintains that qualitative research is appropriate to exploring in detail the needs underlying information seeking behaviour since:

- *our concern is with uncovering the facts of the everyday life of the people we are studying;*
- *by uncovering those facts we aim to understand the needs that exist which press the individual towards information seeking behaviour;*
- *by better understanding of those needs we are able to understand what meaning information has in the everyday life of the people; and*
- *by all of the foregoing we should have a better understanding of the user, be better able to design more effective information services, and be better able to create useful theory of information seeking behaviour and information use. (online)*

Wilson's recommendations support the adoption of the naturalistic paradigm in this study.

Mellon (1990) similarly argues that naturalistic enquiry is appropriate to information science as it is concerned with people. As professionals, we need to know how and why people think and act as they do if we are to respond effectively to their information needs. In order to understand individuals' information worlds: how they interpret the concept of information, why they seek information, how they go about it, and how they subsequently act on the information received, it is essential to ask them. A systems- or provider-based approach cannot define people's information needs, which derive from their unique lifestyles; however, this approach has been a common one. Dervin and Nilan (1986: 16) suggest that the qualitative paradigm is one in which information is seen as being constructed by human beings and thus subjective, in contrast to the

quantitative tradition in which information is seen as objective and users are seen in relation to systems. Furthermore, it centres on the individual, and is *'based upon the fundamental understanding that societal issues are constructed by the individual's own interpretation'* (Robson 2002: 4). This study, therefore, falls within the naturalistic paradigm and is detailed and explorative in nature.

Particular research methods are associated with particular philosophical paradigms. People-centred ethnographic methods were felt to be appropriate to this investigation and included a unique combination of participant observation and episodic narrative interviews. As Chatman (1996b) points out, ethnographic methods are the only *'means I know to really get to the lived, contextual meaning of life-worlds different from our own'* (online), in order to gather thick descriptive data about 'disadvantaged' lives.

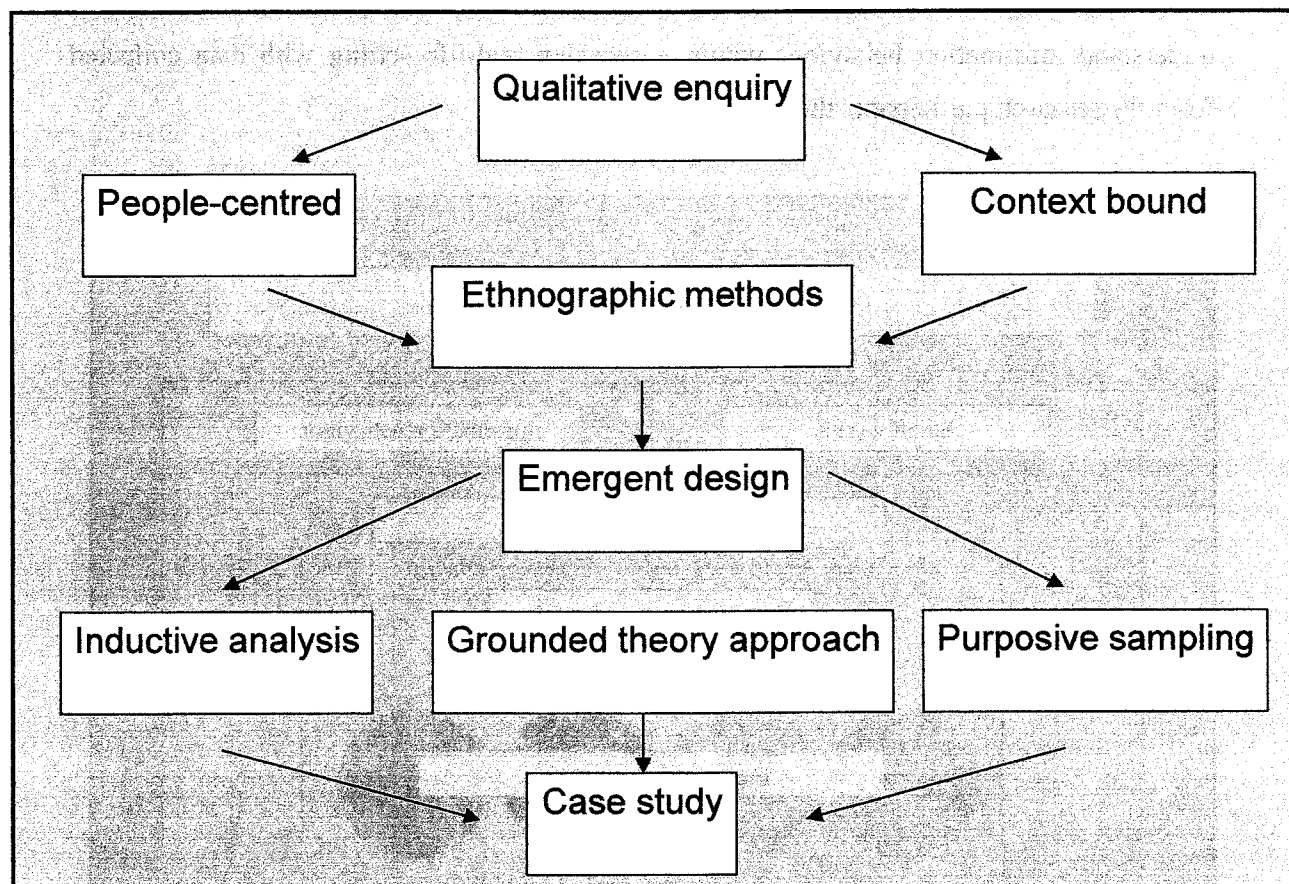
### 4.3 The research design

Following the development of the conceptual and theoretical framework and the establishment of the research question, the research design was developed. Although a preliminary design was constructed as a starting point, the design emerged as data were collected and analysed to allow for refining the focus of the enquiry: *'because it is inconceivable that enough could be known ahead of time about the many multiple realities to devise the design adequately'* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 41). An emergent design also allows the researcher to take advantage of any unexpected opportunities arising during the research process.

The preliminary research design incorporated a grounded theory approach intended to present detailed, rich information not based on any *a priori* theory, but derived inductively from the study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). However, in practice, this was difficult to achieve since there was simply no time to code and analyse observation and interview transcripts using a strict grounded theory approach because of the constraints of the fieldwork (see also section 4.7.1). However, all interview and observation transcripts were scrutinised for emerging themes before returning to the field. No hypothesis directed the study as *'an hypothesis often narrows responses, and hopes to validate or formulate a generalization'* (Natoli, 1982: 169). Ellis (1993) commends this approach as being particularly useful *'where the objective is to develop an awareness of the perceptions that*

*individuals or groups have of their information environment and the role information has in relation to their activities’ (p.484).*

The focus of the enquiry was a community of people living in their natural environment, a ‘disadvantaged’ estate, which was investigated by human instrument – the researcher – using naturalistic data collection methods. The naturalistic approach recognizes the researcher as the instrument, taking into account the experiences and perspectives of the researcher as valuable and meaningful to the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Sampling was purposive as the intent was to study information-rich cases that suited the purposes of the research (Patton, 1990). The final outcome of the research process was a holistic top-down cross-case study of a disadvantaged community with individual embedded case studies within it. Figures 8 and 9 encapsulate these aspects of the research design.



**Figure 8 Research design (adapted from Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 188)**



#### 4.3.1 A case study approach

The intention of case study research, according to Dobson (1999), is to gain '*an in-depth understanding of the concerned phenomena in a real-life setting*' (p.1). A case study focuses on a bounded system, usually under natural conditions, so that the system can be understood in its own habitat (Stake, 1994) and the approach '*seeks holistic description and interpretation*' (Merriam, 1988: 9). According to Connell, Lynch and Waring (2001), '*Case studies offer the prospective researcher the ability to obtain rich data with high ... whilst situating and interpreting data within their wider context (holism)*'. A case study describes a local situation and provides enough information that the reader can understand the context and the relationships. Allison (1996) considers case studies to be '*in-depth studies of particular events, circumstances or situations which offer the prospect of revealing understandings of a kind that might escape broader surveys*' (p.15). The present study satisfied the requirements of a case study profile and was an in-depth study that sought to understand information behaviour within a complex real-life setting with data collected from the research participants themselves.

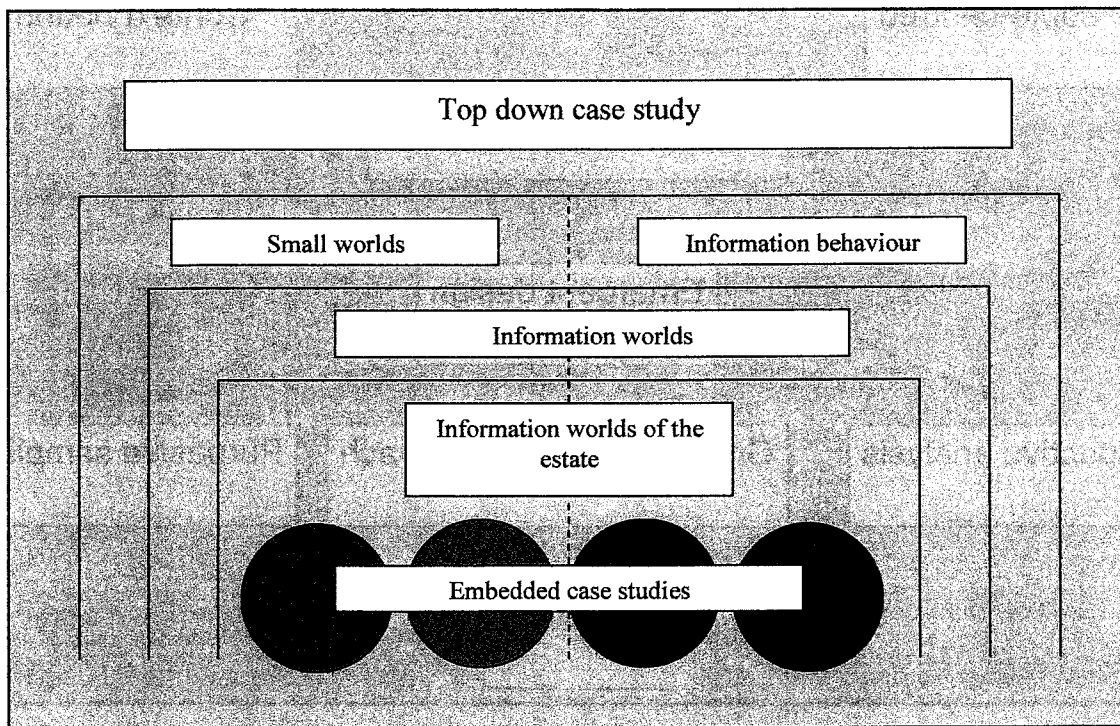


Figure 9 Design of the case study

As Figure 9 depicts, this case study is what Yin (1994) describes as '*embedded*' (p.41), as it deals with a specific phenomenon – people's information worlds – through the eyes of individuals but synthesises emerging themes into an overall understanding. An embedded case study has a main unit and a number of sub-units of study, in this instance a community and some of its members. By focusing on embedded case studies, it was possible to characterise both individual information behaviour, which was unique to each individual, as well as to present an overall picture of information behaviour through analysis across the individual embedded cases.

#### 4.4 Gaining entry

Entry to the estate was gained via the community resource centre manager. The manager introduced the researcher to the chair of the residents' Community Action Partnership (CAP), a key figure on the estate, whose goodwill was needed for access and for acceptance in the community. The manager suggested writing a letter to the chair, which would then be circulated among the CAP members; this the researcher did (see Appendix B). The CAP approved access, and the fieldwork began.

According to Gubrium and Holstein (1997), entry '*is not just a starting hurdle, but is an integral, ongoing feature of social relations in the field*' (p.68). Ely et al (1991) echo this, suggesting that it is a continuous process and '*the trust and cooperation one establishes at one point need(s) to be maintained*' (p.25). Carey, McKechnie and McKenzie (2001) maintain that little attention has been paid to gaining entry in research reports. According to the authors, '*empathy and rapport could be cultivated around ... shared experiences. Usually these insights emerged through casual, undirected small talk*' (p.8). The authors cite several factors that helped to nurture access in their own research: respect for participants, respect for their life worlds, flexibility, time to gain and maintain trust, and reciprocity. The researcher was careful to ensure that these six issues were addressed not only during the fieldwork process but in the thesis itself; the issues are outlined more fully in the sections dealing with engaging with the community and in the reflections on the research.

A personal concern during the research process was how to transcend the perceived cultural and social gap in researching a small world which was other. Chatman (1992) was aware of the cultural gap between her and her respondents and made a conscious decision

not to alter her accent or mannerisms; however, she makes no mention of dress. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) maintain, '*your appearance, speech and behaviour must be acceptable to your research participants*' (p.95). With this in mind, the researcher ensured that her clothing was casual: jeans. Chatman (2000b) advises researchers to 'be humble' – excellent advice. She believed respondents allowed her to enter their lives because she cared to listen, to try to see the world as they saw it, and because she strove to tell their stories to the world of outsiders.

Agada (1999) in his research into the information use environment of African-American gatekeepers in an inner-city neighbourhood stated '*gaining entry to the population and preparations leading to data collection took about seven months*' (p.76). Certainly, in this research it took at least six months of preparation before many of participants felt comfortable enough to leave the comfort zone of the café and be interviewed in a separate room, which was not ideal but necessary, as the café was noisy. Gaining access was the beginning of the development of a trusting relationship and did not end at that point.

## 4.5 Sampling issues

### 4.5.1 The setting

Consonant with the research aims, it was necessary to locate a disadvantaged community in which information worlds could be explored. Northeast England, where the study took place, is a geographical area with high disadvantage in terms of unemployment, poverty, crime and other indices of deprivation, owing to the loss of mining and manufacturing jobs in the region. The setting was therefore selected purposively by criterion sampling and was a small estate with deep-rooted problems of unemployment, poverty, crime, intimidation and violence (DETR, 2000).

Criterion sampling refers to selecting participants and/or settings based on pre-determined criteria (Merriam, 1988); in this case the criterion was disadvantage. The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) (DETR, 2000) scores provided a useful starting point for locating a setting. The estate met the criterion of being disadvantaged according to IMD scores, and it was ranked within the top 10% most deprived wards in the UK. The estate was also geographically accessible to the researcher.

The estate was built after slum clearance made way for city improvements. Just over 2000 people live there. It remains notorious locally for its social and economic problems, which persist despite large injections of financial aid. A regeneration scheme financed through Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding included a new community resource centre that became the site for the case study. The community centre was chosen for three reasons:

- The community centre manager was a former librarian (like the researcher), and this commonality provided a way to gain entry to the estate.
- It was a place in the community where residents gathered every day.
- It was a safe space: the estate was potentially dangerous and knocking on doors was not an option. Advice was taken from the researcher's supervisory team and from other professionals about this issue.

#### 4.5.2 Research participants: residents

After choice of location, it was necessary to make decisions about who from within the community would comprise the sample. According to Patton (1990):

*The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term 'purposeful' sampling (p.169).*

Naturalistic inquiry relies on purposeful rather than random or representative sampling, as the intent is not to be able to generalise to the population as a whole (Messinger, 2001). The emphasis is on a particular setting from which others may transfer similarities to their own setting. Silverman (2000) maintains that sampling in qualitative research is '*neither statistical nor purely personal: it is, or should be, theoretically grounded*' (p.105). The sample should represent the range of experience of the phenomenon under study (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994).

As the intent of this project was to study information-rich cases in-depth, a purposive sample was chosen. Finding people willing to be interviewed was difficult and awkward as residents were wary of a new face in their midst. Sending letters of request was not a suitable mechanism because of literacy problems and because it was too formal a process to engage residents. However, three residents, whom the community resource team

recommended, agreed to be interviewed. As these three were well liked and respected within the community, it was hoped that their willingness to participate might demonstrate that the researcher was trustworthy. They were, in effect, gatekeepers of the community (Foley and Martin, 2000) whose knowledge, expertise, strength of character and commitment meant they were key individuals within the community. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to these types as 'informants' and suggest that in order to minimise some of the problems caused through social and cultural differences and trust-building, informants can help provide an inside view of '*the norms, attitudes, constructions, processes and culture that characterise the local setting*' (p.258).

The three informants were helpful and knowledgeable about the estate and about the people living there. They were interviewed about the background of the estate and about their information behaviour and were asked if they could suggest others who would be willing to be interviewed (snowball sampling). Snowball sampling, where respondents refer researchers on to other respondents, has advantages for research in difficult-to-reach populations such as the deprived and the socially stigmatised as it helps to get around the issue of trust (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). All three were unwilling to suggest possible candidates as they felt that most residents would not be happy being interviewed, and it was decided to delay further interviews until the researcher was more established within the community and to allow for a period of participant observation to facilitate this.

During the observation phase, a further purposive sample of 18 research participants was chosen for interview from among the group of residents with whom the researcher had become acquainted. This time the criteria were based on establishing a balanced perspective in terms of what they could contribute to the research, as well as their willingness to participate more fully in the project. Through participant observation, much was known about their lives and about their information needs, and they seemed comfortable with the researcher. Residents were asked if they were willing to be interviewed, and although some were hesitant, none of the 18 refused. All were given verbal assurances that interview data would be used anonymously in the final thesis and in any journal articles or conference papers. Interviewees were also told of the expected duration of the interview. All names, place names and other potential identifying factors have been changed.

In addition, within the community centre there were 30 or so 'minor characters' – some of whom did not want to be interviewed and some the researcher did not choose to ask to interview for several reasons, including intimidation (some of the male (and female) residents were aggressive) and expediency (some of the residents stopped using the centre during the fieldwork).

Snowball sampling was considered again later in the project when two participants asked if I would like to be introduced to potential interviewees. However, this failed to happen as the two participants subsequently stopped visiting the community centre. Snowball sampling was used on a couple of other occasions when residents asked friends or recommended others (although this also resulted in people declining to be interviewed), and when the community support worker asked a resident, who agreed. It was not the main method of choosing the sample, but it was useful nonetheless on occasions when the researcher had reached an impasse.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that emergent and sequential sampling can reach saturation point with as few as 12 respondents. A relatively small sample can produce great diversity, detailed information and rich descriptions. As the purpose of the sample was to maximise information yield, it was not possible to give a pre-established figure; however, saturation in terms of emerging themes and new ideas was reached with 21 participants.

In the light of the sampling difficulties experienced in the research, Coyne's (1997) assertion,

*Some may argue that there is no perfect way of sampling, as it is a process that continues to evolve with the methodology. The research should find out what information is most needed and most useful in a given situation, and then employ the most suitable method (p.630),*

was apposite, and the sampling strategies evolved with the research process.

#### 4.5.3 Research participants: key workers

Alongside residents, key workers, who were '*experienced and knowledgeable experts*' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), were also interviewed for four reasons:

- to triangulate data collection and to achieve a balanced perspective: residents were not always able to articulate their information needs, and it was helpful to ask key

workers, who knew people well, about their experiences of residents' information and help needs, particularly at the beginning of the fieldwork;

- to gain an insight into the perspectives of both information seeker and the information provider involved in the information acquisition process;
- to look more closely at barriers to information access: data gathered from residents indicated that key workers were among information sources they would and also would not use; and
- to ask them to recommend other residents who might be useful to interview.

Sampling with key workers was data driven and purposeful. A total of 13 key workers were interviewed and were approached in two ways, either informally, while they were in the community centre, or by telephone. They were told verbally about the nature of the research and the researcher's background. All were given verbal assurances that interview data would be used anonymously in the final thesis and in any journal articles or conference papers. Interviewees were asked if they were willing to be involved in the research project and were told of the expected duration of the interview. They were then asked to name a date, time and place convenient for them.

Two key workers felt unable to participate in the interview process: the deputy head of the primary school on the estate and the former health visitor. The deputy head was approached by phone and by letter but felt she did not have the time to spare. The health worker gave no specific reason, but explained she preferred not to be involved.

## 4.6 Data collection methods

Data collection methods emerged from the methodology and from the research question. In order to examine the participants' information behaviour and the ways information is socially constructed, it was necessary to gain an understanding of the '*cultural machinery*' (Crabtree et al, 1998: 7) of the community: to observe and describe the phenomena of 'everyday life' and the social practices of the community. In this project the methodological framework was qualitative, and two main methods of data collection were chosen, although several were considered.

Although this study was not an ethnographic study per se – the researcher did not 'go native' – there were commonalities with ethnographic research, such as the study of a

culture, the use of multiple methods, diverse forms of data, prolonged engagement, the researcher as instrument and multiple perspectives (Massey, 1998). Ethnographic methods provide '*the ability to look beneath the surface of common sense understandings*' (Thomas and Nyce, 2001: 112), allowing the researcher to delve beyond the obvious in order to gather nuanced, complex and rich data.

Ethnographic methods are suited to research into information behaviour since they entail finding out about real-world lives and about issues participants might find difficult to articulate. Forsythe (1998) states that there is '*a need for information about what specific categories of people in the real world actually want to know ... and find useful*' (p.404) and maintains that the purpose of ethnography is to investigate such questions in real-world settings. She believes that ethnographic methods are a way of exploring unperceived information needs, which she refers to as *information deficits*. Questionnaires cannot reach information about which the respondents are unaware.

Ethnographic data collection methods offered two important advantages for this study:

- *to explore small worlds, it was necessary to observe people's everyday behaviour and to listen to their stories in order to elicit their opinions and beliefs.*
- *to develop trust and build relationships, a period of prolonged engagement was needed* (Connell, Lynch and Waring, 2001).

#### 4.6.1 Data collection methods considered

Before describing the methods used, this section will discuss the data collection methods that were considered but ultimately rejected. The critical incident technique (CIT) was the first of these. CIT examines a brief memorable information seeking episode in order to identify patterns of use or potential use. The incident needs to be a memorable one with a clear purpose and with specifiable consequences. The method applies usually to analysis of professional activities (Flick, 1998). This was thought to be inappropriate in this research as asking for a memorable incident of information seeking lay outside some participants' frame of reference: the term *information* is a nebulous one and some participants were not comfortable with it.

Vignettes were also considered: short scenarios that simulate a realistic information situation to demonstrate how people would act under the particular circumstances described. Urquhart (1998) describes vignettes as short, hypothetical stories based on



particular characters and situations. A weakness of this approach lies in the fact that as vignettes are essentially hypothetical, the actions prompted may not in fact be the course of action that would happen in practice. Vignettes were not used to explore information behaviour in this research, as one of the principal aims was to gain real stories of real situations and to avoid hypothetical responses.

Thirdly, participative action (PA) research was considered. PA is a useful method for engaging with the 'disadvantaged' as the research participants have a voice in studying themselves and their situation. PA uses pictures and diagrams to encourage people to think laterally about the research issues and is useful in populations where literacy is an issue. PA is also premised upon outputs – participants help provoke a concrete output from the research, such as a change in policy. As it was impossible to promise any concrete changes or benefits from the research, PA was not used for this project, although the researcher attempted, unsuccessfully, to incorporate aspects of it, such as pictures, into the data collection. The chair of the women's group in the community centre was asked if she thought the women would be willing to try out a session involving PA. The researcher explained the process to her, and she said she would like to have papers to show at the next meeting as examples of what they might be asked to do. The researcher prepared examples and wrote a note to the group, but the group rejected the idea, saying they were not interested. The idea was not pursued further as it was felt that their rejection should be accepted. Dobbs and Moore's (2002) coda to PA were appropriate:

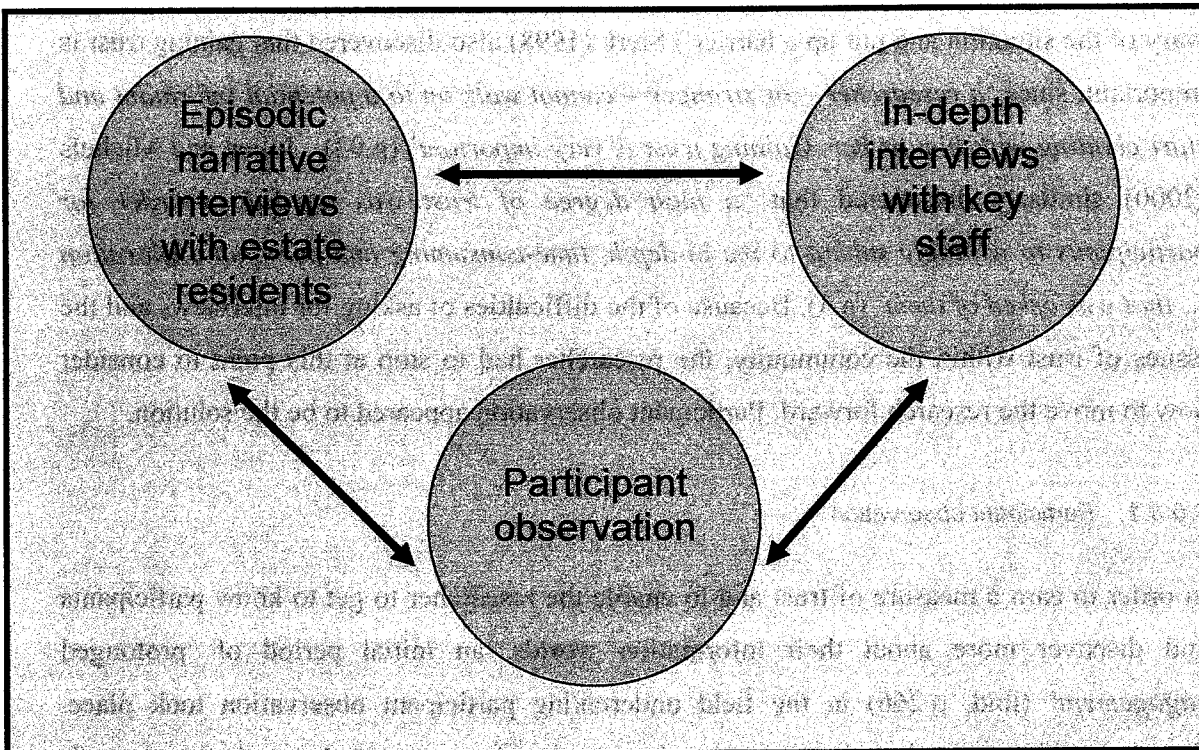
*Genuine research partnerships involving local people require a receptive environment; however, a number of key tensions exist. These relate to national policy, partnership structures, levels of commitment to community empowerment and community capacity. These characteristics make participatory research difficult to develop within the context of area-based regeneration (p.7).*

A final method considered was Kelly's (1991) personal construct theory, which proposes that constructs or patterns emerge from a person's experiences that predict or anticipate future behaviour. Behaviour, therefore, depends on the constructs a person holds true. (See also Kuhlthau, 1993a) Because of some participants' reticence and lack of articulation, an adaptation of Kelly's (1991) Repertory Grid was designed to offer a way for participants to explain their information needs and sources (see Appendix D). Respondents were to indicate the types of information they had searched for over the past month and the

sources they might have used, whether successful or not. This would then, it was hoped, generate stories about individual information seeking episodes. Although this seemed a feasible method, in practice it did not work well as the grid was too cluttered, and the two respondents it was tested on found it overwhelming: there was simply too much information to consider. The grid, in fact, reflected the complexity and messiness of information seeking.

#### 4.6.2 Data collection methods used in this study

Three methods of data collection were used in the study as shown in Figure 10 below, which also highlights the ways in which each method informed and underpinned the others by adding strength and rigour to the data collection process. The three methods were participant observation, narrative interviews with 21 residents and in-depth interviews with 13 key staff. The latter two methods were employed at specific points during the fieldwork whereas participant observation continued throughout the process.



**Figure 10 Data collection methods used in the study**

These methods were used in order to explore how everyday life determined the information behaviour of the residents and to discover the information needs, sources of information and barriers to access of people on the estate. In order to implement the data collection in this emergent design, three phases of enquiry followed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The first of these was '*orientation and overview*' (ibid, p.235).

#### 4.6.3 Phase 1: orientation and overview

The first phase of the fieldwork, '*orientation and overview*', was necessary to earn trust and to establish rapport with the research participants as well as to gain a deeper sense of the context and the salient themes of the study. Lincoln and Guba (ibid) make it very clear that trust is not only crucial, but also difficult to establish and maintain. They go as far as to assert that the credibility of the research '*depends on the extent to which trust has been established*' (p.257). Initial informal chat with many research participants was difficult and unproductive owing to lack of trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants. (One resident responded to a question about the estate by denying he lived there; he was wary of the situation and put up a barrier.) Sterk (1998) also discovered that gaining trust is important, since '*a researcher – or stranger – cannot walk up to a potential informant and start chatting with him or her. Gaining trust is very important*' (p.93). Julien and Michels (2000) similarly discovered that '*a high degree of trust was needed in order for participants to willingly submit to the in-depth, time-consuming and personal exploration ... that was asked of them*' (p.3). Because of the difficulties of asking for interviews and the issues of trust within the community, the researcher had to stop at this point to consider how to move the research forward. Participant observation appeared to be the solution.

##### 4.6.3.1 Participant observation

In order to earn a measure of trust and to enable the researcher to get to know participants and discover more about their information worlds, an initial period of '*prolonged engagement*' (ibid, p.266) in the field undertaking participant observation took place. Douglas (1980) avers that '*becoming involved in the phenomena to be studied is the only effective way to penetrate the fronts that often hide the actions of human beings*' (p.173). In order for us to understand the lives of others, we must integrate ourselves as fully as

possible with their lives. In Merton's (1972) terms, it is necessary to be both an insider and an outsider *'to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of truth seeking.'* Scholarly social research demands of the researcher a facility for sympathetic detachment and an ability to be both insider and outsider in order to reveal the truth of the situation; similarly Dervin (1997) advises that in investigations into information behaviour, we must attend to both *'proximity and distance'* (p.31).

Observation was carried out several times a week at the community centre from August 2001 until the end of the fieldwork in December 2002, although interviewing began simultaneously in March 2002. The environment – the appearance of the estate, the community centre inside and out and the layout of the rooms – was observed. Also observed were people within their environment: the ways they communicated, their manner, their emotions, their language, their attitudes and their interactions. The researcher spent many hours in *'active participation'* (Spradley, 1979: 60): talking with respondents, listening to their stories, playing bingo, helping in the Computer Centre and at coffee mornings, and joining in local learning sessions such as a local history group. These observations painted an increasingly illuminating picture of the participants' everyday lives and of their information behaviour. The researcher was able to listen to people talking in their natural environment about issues, problems and dilemmas they faced and how, if at all, they resolved them. Crucially, this period allowed the essential development of trust between the researcher and the participants. Because of the high level of trust needed, an extended amount of time in the field was necessary. Sterk (1998) learned important lessons in gaining trust, which mirrored the researcher's, stating that she felt that honesty and openness were key issues and her participants' feelings always remained paramount.

Participant observation allowed the opportunity to discover things that would never have been discovered through direct questioning, since the residents sometimes found it difficult to articulate a response and also because the interview itself posed barriers. Taylor (1991) echoes this observation:

*... one learns things through participant observation that cannot be learned any other way. I have observed things that they would never think to talk about and I would never think to ask* (p.243).

At times, engaging with the community was accompanied by feelings of awkwardness and discomfort. There were worries about fitting in, being different, reciprocating sufficiently and appropriately, and finding answers to the research questions. Reading others' accounts

of their feelings of '*bouts of anxiety*' (Shaffir, 1991: 77) and '*nerve-wracking and exhausting*' (ibid, p.77) experiences in the field was reassuring.

Through participant observation, a deeper understanding of the everyday lives of the participants was achieved, which would not have been possible through interviewing alone. Furthermore, a trusting relationship developed, which helped sensitise the researcher to emergent issues in the informants' information behaviour, which were then investigated further via the interviews. It therefore improved both the overall research design and the data collection.

#### 4.6.3.2 *Designing the interview framework*

Qualitative research involves understanding participants' stories, and in addition to listening and observing, questioning is essential (Ely et al, 1991). But how was this to be achieved? *Information* is a difficult idea to conceptualise, and asking the research participants to identify information problems seemed inappropriate, since the term was sometimes alien and occasionally even scary. This became apparent during participant observation: people sometimes did not make the connection between an issue or problem and the need for information. So, what were the alternatives?

In Dervin et al's (1976) study of the information needs of urban residents, respondents were asked to name problems, worries or concerns they had had in the past month. They were then given 12 topic cues, e.g., housing, employment, etc., and asked whether their concerns were in any of the topic areas. Importantly in that study, use of the word *information* was avoided in order not to constrain respondents to a pre-defined concept of the word. Respondents were asked to identify situations where they needed help, where they didn't understand something, where they needed to make a decision or where they were worried about something. They were then questioned in more depth about one of their concerns. Others (Childers, 1975; Hersberger, 2000) have also imposed a topic framework. In the present study, the researcher did not use this approach as it was felt to be important to allow respondents' information needs to be revealed from the context and from them, rather than to be suggested by topic cues. Chen and Hernon (1982) avoided the term *information* and instead asked the respondents '*to describe an important work or non-work situation from the past month or so in which they made a decision, found an answer to*

*a question, solved a problem, or tried to understand something'* (p.42). Questions along these lines seemed more appropriate.

An interview framework, intended to address the information behaviour of the residents in their own terms, was drawn up focusing on the research aims (see Appendix C). The centre manager and the community social worker offered their opinions on the interview framework and felt some language was too complex, some questions too intrusive, and it was felt to be too long. Bearing these factors in mind, the interview framework was further revised three times to take into account participants' comments as well as to incorporate emerging patterns and themes. Three residents were interviewed using the initial interview framework as a 'quasi' pilot. Piloting the interview framework in a more formal manner with research participants was not possible at that stage of the fieldwork, again because of the difficulties establishing trust. The first three interviews were exploratory and provided detail about local context as well as the individuals' everyday lives. Although this worked reasonably well with one participant describing the interview as 'a chat', she said it took too long.

#### *4.6.3.3 Engaging with the community: trust, reciprocity and rapport*

Trust, reciprocity and rapport go hand-in-hand; reciprocity, as mentioned previously, was one of the ways employed to develop and maintain a trusting relationship. It was also important for the researcher's peace of mind, since it was important to give back to the community in some way. Building trust and rapport with the respondents was vital for this study to work, and engaging with people whose social worlds were different from the researcher's took time. Agar (1980) discusses some of the problems and dilemmas inherent in ethnographic studies and suggests researchers need to deal with the '*culture shock*' (p.50) of working within a different community where the rules are unfamiliar. He suggests four ways of gaining informants' trust: firstly, by being genuinely interested in and respectful of the other person's point of view; secondly, by remembering that most people like telling their story to an interested listener; thirdly, by being interested in group life and sharing meals and so on; lastly, by being willing to reciprocate whenever possible. Again, the researcher took care to ensure that all four aspects occurred, although this was, in fact, a relatively easy and natural task.

In relationships among people, according to Lee (1993), *'trust is facilitated because those within the relationship have much information about each other arising from self-disclosure and from observations of past actions'* (p.123). Building trust was a two-way process, with both parties divulging information about themselves. Talking to people about my life encouraged them to talk about their own.

Lofland (1971) believes that reciprocities are necessary and can be achieved through the researcher's personal style being non-threatening, supportive and interested. Weis et al (2000) agree that *'just listening in a non-judgmental way is very important'* (p.77), and this was something the researcher endeavoured to do. Financial payment was considered but dismissed as introducing potential bias (the research participants might have been more inclined to answer questions in ways they felt the researcher might have wanted, rather than from their actual experience), as well as being beyond the researcher's means. Instead, the researcher decided that, as Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggest:

*What you do have that they value is the means to be grateful, by acknowledging how important their time, cooperation and words are; by expressing your dependence on what they have to offer; and by elaborating on your pleasure with their company.* (p.122-123)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the researcher always keeps in mind the question, *'What have you done for me lately?'* Reciprocity in this research meant joining in activities, helping with IT sessions, buying sweets at Christmas and Easter, providing the local newspaper, offering a listening ear for those who wanted it, participating in local clubs, and helping at coffee mornings and other social events. I also ensured that I thanked the research participants for their time and their help. This strategy was successful and a strong relationship was established with a number of people in the community. After I helped out at a children's party, the chair of the Community Action Partnership said, *'it's really good of you to help.'* My response was that it was good of them to let me be there and that they helped me. He responded, *'I just want you to know it was nice of you to come'* (O58-2). There were other examples of successful reciprocity (see Chapter 9: Reflections on the research).

It was also vital to be seen as *'a person of discretion'* (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992: 91), who did not gossip or pass on sensitive information. Residents realised that whatever they said to me would be confidential, and this contributed towards building a trusting relationship. As the research progressed the issue of trust became easier, and as research

participants became more familiar with the researcher and with the research, they came to not only trust the researcher, but also to look after her and to ensure she was safe within the community. (See also reflections on research.)

Because of residents' deep distrust of officials and authority figures, in common with others in similar circumstances (Dobbs and Moore, 2002), it was necessary to keep a distance from some officials, especially those whom residents disliked or distrusted. This issue is also discussed further in reflections on research.

Personality was another important factor in this research. Being humble, as Chatman (2000b) advised, was essential. It was also essential to always be aware that other people, although they may not share your lifestyle and values, do share the human qualities of feelings and pride. Wax (1971), quoted in Shaffir and Stebbins (1991), suggests that a researcher will be judged '*not because of what he says about himself or about the research, but by the style in which he lives and acts, and by the way he treats them*' (p.365). Adler and Adler (1980) also suggest that '*one fundamental characteristic required ... is personability*' (p.182). Without an instinctive knowledge of what is appropriate in the setting, the authors suggest that a researcher might easily destroy trust and rapport. By being humble, interested, helpful and caring, the researcher came to be accepted and trusted by the community. Without trust, there would have been no research.

#### 4.6.4 Phase 2: focused exploration

The second phase, '*focused exploration*' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 235), evolved from the first. Participant observation continued but was supplemented with interviews, which afforded a more focused and in-depth approach to salient issues and also revealed new themes. Interviews are a widely used methodological tool, which take several forms from individuals to focus groups and may be structured, semi-structured or unstructured, depending on the prior knowledge of the interviewer, the research question and the context of the research. Unstructured interviews seemed best suited to this study since they are flexible and informal, and are what Lofland (1971) characterises as '*a strategy of discovery*' (p.75) intended to '*elicit rich, detailed materials*' (p.76).

A conversational approach, in which the researcher tries to engage in real conversation with give-and-take rather than contributing no personal opinions or information, is a common recommendation. Fontana and Frey (1994) argue that this makes



the interview *'more honest, morally sound and reliable because it treats the respondent as an equal'* (p.371). The idea of equality between researcher and researched is also emphasised by Clandinin and Connelly (1994) and by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), who favour modelling interviews on conversation. A conversational approach with *'a mixture of conversation and embedded questions'* (Fetterman, 1989: 39) was the tone of interviews with residents and also with key staff.

The episodic narrative technique outlined by Flick (1998) is an unstructured interview method that suited the purposes of this study, and interviews with residents loosely followed the guidelines of episodic narrative interviewing. Interviews with key staff members followed a semi-structured format more suited to a group of professionals.

#### 4.6.4.1 *Episodic narrative interviews with residents*

When engaging with participants, an informal approach was crucial as residents disliked formal processes. A conversational narrative or story approach would, it was hoped, not endanger the trust developed during phase one of the fieldwork, and it suited the purpose of the research as well as the participants' cultural sensibilities. In the social sciences generally, narrative is used primarily for therapeutic purposes or to improve professional practice (Greenhalgh and Hurwitz, 1999; Bishop et al, 2000; Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000; Mattingly and Lawlor, 2000). Victim stories and illness stories commonly use a narrative framework. Use of narrative interviewing in Information Science is uncommon, but in researching the information behaviour of people living 'disadvantaged' everyday lives, the episodic narrative method was valuable because telling stories:

- is a universal skill and a natural tool of communication between the researcher and those being researched,
- is a means of empowering the research participants by enabling them to find a voice and by minimising the interviewer's influence,
- is a way to elicit contextual information about the participants' lives as well as how information resides in their lives,
- encourages an informal environment.

Narrative interviewing encourages research participants to express their responses to the interview topic in a universal format: a story. Stories are part of our everyday lives, since, '*People narrativise their experience of the world and of their own role in it*' (Bruner, 1990: 115), and in order to '*make sense of our lives, we 'story' our experiences*' (Dwivedi and Gardner, 1997: 19). Story telling is an elementary form of human communication that requires no academic or linguistic competence; it is a '*... skill relatively independent of education and language competence*' (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000: 58). People tell stories all the time; they are a natural part of daily discourse. Because of this, it was hoped that telling stories would allow participants to feel comfortable and it would encourage articulation of a nebulous concept: information behaviour.

The narrative approach focuses on the individual and on discovering and valuing personal stories in order to understand the choices people make, the constraints and assumptions they struggle with, and the structure of their lives. Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf (2000) argue that the social relevance of the narrative approach '*can lead to fresh insights and creative approaches in work with disadvantaged or vulnerable groups and individuals*' (p.22). By giving people a voice and an opportunity to be heard, it was hoped that the interview process might empower the participants and so bring benefits to them as well as to the researcher. Dwivedi and Gardner (ibid) maintain that, '*... for disempowered individuals or groups the opportunity to find a voice and tell a story can be especially beneficial*' (p.24).

Episodic narrative is useful in discovering and analysing participants' everyday knowledge about specific issues (Flick, 1998). The narrative interview was used to elicit contextual information about participants' lives as well as about their information behaviour, which arises from everyday life experiences. Gotham and Staples (1996) suggest that the use of the case study method combined with narrative in social research at the '*street level*' (p.489) provides a way of looking at social actions and relations in context. They add that '*detailed and rich data ... can permit the researcher to develop a solid empirical base for conceptual framing and theoretical innovation*' (p.491).

Because the narrative interview encourages informality, it helps both interviewer and interviewee to feel at ease, and, as Bruner (1990) suggests, it '*encourage(s) meaning-making*' rather than eliciting the '*categorical responses*' (p.123). Episodic narrative interviews (Flick, 1998), which were used in this study, focus on specific episodes or stories from participants' everyday lives. They move from the unconstrained narrative

interview ('tell me the story of your life') and structure an organisational framework around the narrative by focusing on purposive questions. The questions move from the general, e.g., 'What does information mean to you?', to the more central and specific in order to elicit stories of personal experience, e.g., 'Tell me about any information you needed this week'.

#### 4.6.4.2 The interviews

Eighteen residents were interviewed during the second phase of the fieldwork (three having been interviewed in phase one) using the interview framework developed during the first phase (see Appendix C). Interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes and were conducted in a private room in the community centre. With participants' permission, in all cases except one, interviews were taped in order to gather rich, descriptive data for analysis and to support the findings (Patton, 1990), as well as to contribute towards the trustworthiness of the research. One participant did not want the interview to be taped and his request was respected without question. The researcher had expected this as the participant was very difficult to get to know and was extremely wary of the researcher at that time. He was among the first to be interviewed and was asked by a staff member to participate; the researcher would not have asked him to be interviewed at that time.

In two cases, residents were interviewed in pairs with a relative (wife/husband; mother/son) as the women were reluctant to be interviewed alone. This worked reasonably well, although the interviewer had to ensure that the more passive participant was encouraged to join in the conversation. By that stage of the research, the researcher and participants were familiar enough with each other for the researcher to interject and ask the more passive interviewee for her opinion and for the more confident interviewee to be quiet.

The interviews opened with an explanation of the research that culminated in the statement, *"I'm trying to find out stories, really, about times when you've had to or wanted to go and find out about something."* Questions that followed were intended to:

- establish participants' interpretation of the word *information*,
- elicit the kinds of things about which people wanted or needed to find out, or the kinds of things with which they needed help,
- discover where and how people would look for information and help, and

- determine enablers and barriers to information access.

In cases where the initial responses were unclear, monosyllabic or not answered at all, the participants were asked the same question a number of ways. So, for example, the opening question relating to information needs was:

*Can you think of a time recently when you've needed to or wanted to find out about something for yourself or somebody else? (Can you tell me about it? Could you tell me what it was you were trying to find out? Where did you go to find out? Why did you choose that place to find it? Did you get what you needed?)*

The questions in brackets were prompts. If the response was not clear, then a second question was asked: *'What things concern you most in your life?'* And possibly a third: *'If you had a problem you needed or wanted to sort out, where would you normally go?'* Or even a fourth: *'How do find out about things that are important to you?'* In this manner, the researcher hoped to discover the kinds of information and help needs the participants had.

The researcher followed Lofland and Lofland's (1984) recommendations on how to conduct an open-ended interview:

- Before each interview began, the nature of the study was explained to each participant.
- The researcher attempted to put people at ease by telling them a bit more about herself, and by emphasising the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview, and inviting them to stop and ask for clarification on any of the questions if necessary.
- Participants were reminded that they did not have to respond to every question or to any question they did not want to.
- Permission to tape was requested but a consent form was not used because of literacy difficulties and dislike of formalities. The researcher explained that taping was needed as a means of remembering the conversation.
- The interview structure was flexible, allowing for a wide range of discussion. The interview guide was used as *'a checklist of sorts, a kind of inventory of things you want to talk about during the interview'* (p.59).
- The researcher tried to avoid leading questions and to use sensitivity when discussing personal topics.

However, in spite of all the careful preparation, interviewing was sometimes a stressful experience, as many of the research participants were uncomfortable leaving the security of the café and unsure about the interview process. The section dealing with reflections on methods elucidates these difficulties more fully.

After interviews with residents had begun and themes were starting to emerge, interviews were carried out with key staff in order to gain another perspective and to explore issues further.

#### 4.6.4.3 *Semi-structured interviews with key staff*

Semi-structured interviews fall between the formal, rigid approach of structured interviewing and the conversational dialogue of unstructured interviewing. Patton (1990) describes semi-structured interviews as an interview guide approach where questions are not rigidly adhered to but provide a direction of enquiry in which the interviewer is '*free to explore, probe and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject.*' Semi-structured interviews were appropriate to interviewing key staff members as no difficulties were envisaged trying to help them feel at ease, the questions were straightforward and related to staff views of residents' small worlds and information needs and sources, and the method allowed room for flexibility. The purpose was to supplement participant observation data and data from interviews with residents and also to explore the issues from a different perspective.

Thirteen key staff members were interviewed, most of whom worked on the estate either full- or part-time in key roles interacting with residents. The exceptions to this were the CAB manager and the librarian. Their roles were:

- Basic skills instructor (part-time in community centre)
- CAB manager (based in town centre, no presence on estate)
- Children's worker (full-time on estate; part-time in community centre)
- Community centre manager (full-time in community centre)
- Education welfare officer (part-time on estate)
- Employment support worker (part-time in community centre)
- Housing officer (full-time on estate, based in housing office)
- Librarian (based in town centre, no presence on estate)

- Police officer (part-time on estate, based in police station)
- Regeneration manager (full-time on estate, based in regeneration office)
- Social worker (part-time in community centre)
- Support worker (full-time in community centre)
- Youth worker (full-time in youth centre on estate)

An interview guide (Patton, 1990) was constructed (See Appendix E). The guide was amended, depending on who was being interviewed and their role on the estate. Because of the prolonged period of observation, the researcher had come to know several staff members well and was aware of specific aspects of their work that warranted further exploration. For example, the basic skills instructor and I had talked informally about the nature and role of trust on the estate, so it was useful during the interview to discuss this in more depth. The education welfare officer's role on the estate involved reinforcing the values and benefits of learning in a community where learning was not valued highly, so the interview was an opportunity to find more about the role of learning. And a final example was the interview with the children's worker, which gave further insights into the type of person to whom residents would turn for help and information, as observation had shown that several residents found her helpful.

All the interviews were taped, with the exception of those with the regeneration manager and the library assistant. These were not taped as they did not have time to be interviewed properly and taping was inexpedient. All were interviewed in their places of work and interviews lasted between 30 minutes and three hours. The interviews were straightforward, unproblematic and highly informative. The staff members gave insight into the lifestyles and life problems that many people on the estate faced. Staff revealed issues, such as drugs and violence, which residents had not discussed during interviews and which had not been mentioned in the community centre when the researcher was present. Residents had referred to these topics in general terms, but not specifically in relation to themselves.

#### 4.6.5 Phase 3: member checks and closure

The third and final phase, '*member checks and closure*' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 235), sought verification of the findings with the sample and closure of the study. Closure and

leaving the field was fraught with anxieties and questions: was there enough data? was I abandoning the participants after gaining what I wanted? would I need to go back to ask more questions? should I stop absolutely or should I maintain a looser contact?

In order to answer the questions of when the fieldwork is finished and closure is imminent, Taylor (1991) suggests the question, '*When does the study yield diminishing returns?*' (p.238). After the interviews in November 2002, it was apparent that in terms of data collection, saturation had been reached. Nothing new had emerged in terms of themes. Visits to the community centre subsequently became less frequent, diminishing from several times a week to once a month, and finally my emigrating meant that physical contact with the community was over.

Member checking was achieved in two ways. Throughout the fieldwork, participants were asked if the emerging findings were consonant with their experience. This was done by asking questions such as, for example, '*I get the feeling that you only get help outside the estate if it's really serious. Is that right?*' or, '*Health concerns seem to be something that you need help with. Is that true?*' Occasionally, participants said they did not know, but usually they confirmed the findings. The researcher also continually checked with participants that they were comfortable with the research process: all said they were.

A second member check occurred at the end of the fieldwork. In June 2004, the researcher visited the centre for the last time in order to verify the findings with participants and to say goodbye. The visit was planned with one of the participants, who agreed to let other participants know. The ideal scenario would have been to gather research participants together to discuss the findings, but several factors hindered this: four participants had been forced to leave the estate because of abuse, many participants no longer visited the centre and the researcher had little time. A compromise was therefore made: the researcher wrote a synopsis (using understandable, simple language) of the findings for participants and two staff, (see Appendix I) and distributed it to them on the day of the visit and asked participants to pass it on. Included were a stamped addressed envelope and a comments sheet. A small gift of a box of chocolates and a thank you note were also given to each participant. This strategy was flawed because written communication of results was not ideal given the literacy problems within the population; however, eight responses were returned, which was reasonably successful, and which confirmed the research findings. Unfortunately, all the responses except one were lost during the researcher's move to Canada. When the loss became apparent, the researcher contacted one of the research

participants, Sarah, to ask for her help. Sarah sent, by email, a collective response, which was not entirely satisfactory. She then offered to ask several of the participants to re-complete the comments section, but nothing materialised. The individual and the collective responses are appended (see Appendix J).

Closure was tinged with a mixture of sadness and relief, as three years had been spent interacting with this group of people, and the research process and participants' lives and characters had affected the researcher deeply. As Taylor (1991) notes, '*the objects of our studies are not objects at all. They are people who may become attached to us and to whom we may become attached*' (p.238).

## 4.7 Data analysis

Data analysis began during data collection,. The purpose of data analysis was to synthesise, to interpret and to build from raw data in order to arrive at a coherent and accurate depiction of the topic being studied and a theoretical understanding of the research problem. In qualitative research, it is generally accepted that analysis and data collection run concurrently, with one informing the other (Ely et al, 1991; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2000).

Data analysis in naturalistic research is inductive and concerned with devising categories based on themes gathered from the data in an intuitive but systematic and informed way based on the research questions, the researcher's knowledge and the issues made explicit by the research participants (Merriam, 1988). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggest that theory emerges '*from the bottom up, from many disparate pieces of collected evidence*' (p.31). In this research, observation and interviews provided opportunities from the outset to scrutinise the data for recurring themes, which informed subsequent data collection. Emerging and potential themes were discussed with colleagues and with research participants, and at that point, the researcher returned to the theoretical framework to check for similarities and differences with other empirical research. Examining previous literature can bring the risk of unconsciously incorporating previous research into present research. By acknowledging this possibility, the researcher hoped to avoid the problem.

The researcher developed a framework for the analysis in this study, taking into account the advice of Lofland (1976) and Miles and Huberman (1994), and using the constant-comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as described by



Maykut and Morehouse (1994). The original plan was to use NVivo, and all the interview data were entered into NVivo and coding the interviews commenced. NVivo is a complex CAQDAS programme and one that the researcher found frustratingly difficult to deal with. Because the data were 'hidden' inside the PC, the researcher felt no longer in control. It was also frustrating not to be able to physically manipulate the documents by spreading them out on a desk and seeing them as a whole. Using IT also seemed to be at odds with the intuitive nature of qualitative research and the idea of human-as-instrument. After struggling with NVivo for about two months, the researcher opted to 'cut-and-paste' using the constant comparative method.

Although the process of analysis is cyclical, the reporting needs to be clear and logical; the data analysis is therefore reported in sequential steps as follows:

1. preparing the data
2. unitising the data
3. identification of a thematic framework
4. a change of plan in tackling the data
5. mapping the data
6. drawing conclusions

#### 4.7.1 Step 1: preparing the data

Preparing the data involved becoming familiar with every aspect of it. Familiarisation involved reading and re-reading all the data generated during the research. There was a huge amount of data from several data sets:

- 21 interviews with estate residents,
- 13 interviews with staff,
- 330 pages of observational data,
- a researcher's journal, which included notes, comments, hunches and ideas, and
- a report written by the researcher for the Community Action Partnership, based on an information needs audit held at the centre.

#### 4.7.1.1 Preparing the interview data

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed except one resident interview, for which permission to tape was refused, and two staff interviews, when it was not expedient to tape them. (Those interviews were written from memory in Microsoft Word immediately following the interview.) The first step in data analysis was to become immersed in the raw data by listening to the interview tapes to get a general feel for the data as well as to identify and list key ideas and recurrent themes. The researcher then transcribed each set of interview data using Microsoft Word. The data were transcribed verbatim (including hesitations), which Maykut and Morehouse (1994) consider '*provides an important opportunity to relive the interview and become substantially more familiar with the data*' (p.101). The researcher tried to ensure that each interview transcript was transcribed before the subsequent interview in order to check for patterns and themes and to look for opportunities for further questions. In fact, this was not always practical. Transcribing was a long process that took approximately two to six hours for each interview, depending on the interview length. The transcripts also included participants' vernacular language. At this initial stage, it seemed important to include everything, as it was not possible to know at the outset what might or might not become important during later stages of analysis. The interviews were then listened to a second time while simultaneously reading the transcripts on the computer to check for any omissions or errors and to become further familiar with the data.

All interviews were then printed out double-spaced, leaving room on the transcripts for comments and ideas. The pages were then photocopied in preparation for analysis. The transcripts were each read several times and notes made of any themes or ideas that occurred during that process. Each transcript was then coded to its source; the code included the type of interview, either with a resident or a member of staff (W), the initials of the interviewee and the page number. So, for example, page 4 of Gerry's interview was coded GY/4 to indicate *his initials/page number*. Page 5 of the interview with the community development worker was W/JK/5 to indicate *worker/his initials/page number*. In some cases, only one initial of the name was used if there was only one person with that first name or initial.

#### *4.7.1.2 Preparing the participant observation data*

No notes were taken during observation as it was too disruptive. The researcher typed up the observation data in Microsoft Word immediately following each period of observation. In total, there were 330 double-spaced pages of observational data. These data were crucial to the research project as they allowed the researcher to discover aspects of participants' lives that did not and could not emerge from interviews. These data supplemented the interview data and also afforded glimpses into the lives of others who were not interviewed.

Each observation record was then coded to its source; the code included (O) for observation and the sequence of observation, which was chronological, followed by the page number, e.g. the 3<sup>rd</sup> page of the 6<sup>th</sup> phase of observation was O6-3. The pages were then photocopied in preparation for analysis. Again, notes were made on the observation records of any patterns or links or themes across data.

#### *4.7.1.3 Preparing other data*

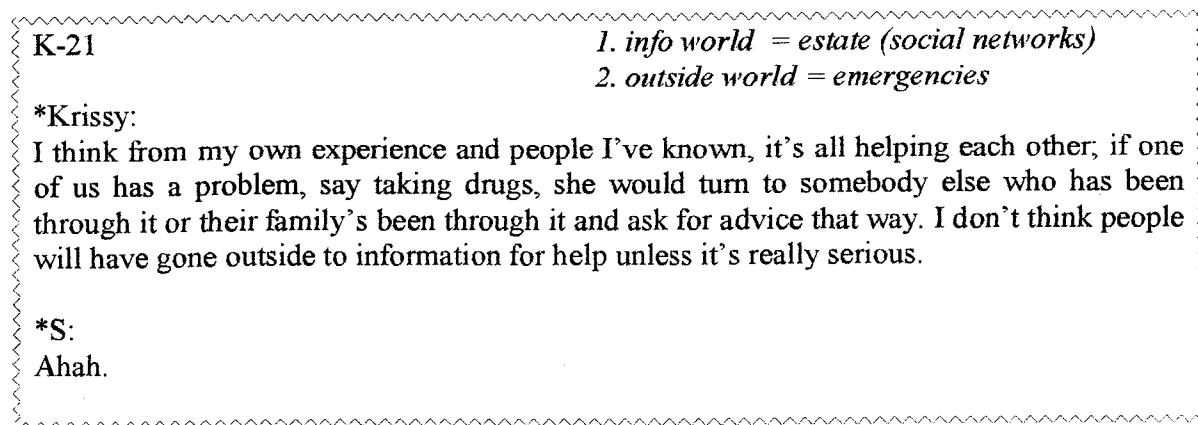
A researcher's log was kept in which the researcher noted any observations, insights or emerging themes and ideas as well reflections on the interviews and personal feelings. These were included as data, but were not subjected to rigorous data analysis; rather they were used to check and confirm themes that appeared later in the data analysis.

The report (see Appendix F) prepared for the Community Action Partnership was also included as data. The document was germane as it reported on an information day at the centre during which estate residents discussed their information needs and concerns about health, environment, crime and youth issues. The report was scrutinised after data analysis of interviews and observations for themes resulting from those analyses and also to determine if any new categories emerged. No new categories emerged, although it was noted that mental health was discussed more openly during the information day than during observation and in interviews. The information day data can be recognised by the code TME and the page number, so TME4 is page 4 of the report.

#### *4.7.2 Step 2: unitising the data*

Having prepared the transcripts, the next step was to look for chunks of meaning in the data (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994) by reading through each interview and observation

transcript as well as the report. Each discrete chunk of meaning was then cut up and pasted onto an index card with the transcript identifier in the top left corner and the emerging theme(s) and idea(s) written on. This was an important part of the analytic process as it meant that data chunks could be linked back to their original data set when needed. Some data chunks were just a few words and others were several paragraphs. An example of a unitised chunk of meaning is shown in Figure 11.



**Figure 11 A unitised chunk of data**

In this example, there were two chunks of meaning for analysis: (1) people's information worlds were within the bounds of the estate, and they helped and advised each other using their social networks, and (2) the outside world of information was only for serious issues.

Since it was impossible at that stage to know whether a data chunk was important or not, every transcript was unitised in this way until all sections of the transcript were accounted for and themes began to emerge.

#### 4.7.3 Step 3: identifying the thematic framework

The next step was to look for recurring issues, concepts and themes across the data. It was important to ensure that any themes or issues emerged inductively from the data and were not imposed. However, the researcher also kept in mind the aims of the study to guide the enquiry, along with findings from previous research (in particular Dervin and Greenberg, 1972; Chen and Hernon, 1982; Chatman, 1992; and Hersberger, 1998) into 'disadvantaged' or excluded populations.

A table was created in Microsoft Word into which all recurring themes and ideas from the index cards were written. This was printed out and cut up into its constituent parts, which were then re-organised into similar themes until no themes were left unaccounted for, and finally an overall name was allotted to each category.

With the broad categories now in place, the index cards were sorted into categories along the lines of the 'constant-comparative' method described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) (originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This involved comparing each unit of meaning within a transcript with previous units so that they could be categorised and coded with like units. If there were no such similar units, a new category was formed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) advise categorising the data initially on the basis of a 'feels right' or 'looks right' principle. Overall, there were four main category areas of small world, information needs, information sources and information barriers, corresponding with four of the research objectives, with 23 sub-categories, 88 sub-sub-categories, 42 sub-sub-sub categories and 14 sub-sub-sub-sub categories (see Appendix H).

An initial attempt at mapping the emerging data themes resulted in a rich picture, shown in Figure 12, developing the inter-relatedness of the participants' information worlds and offering a visual overview of the early findings from the data analysis. It was a first attempt at demonstrating the links between context and information behaviour and focusing on key emergent themes.

# Emerging themes

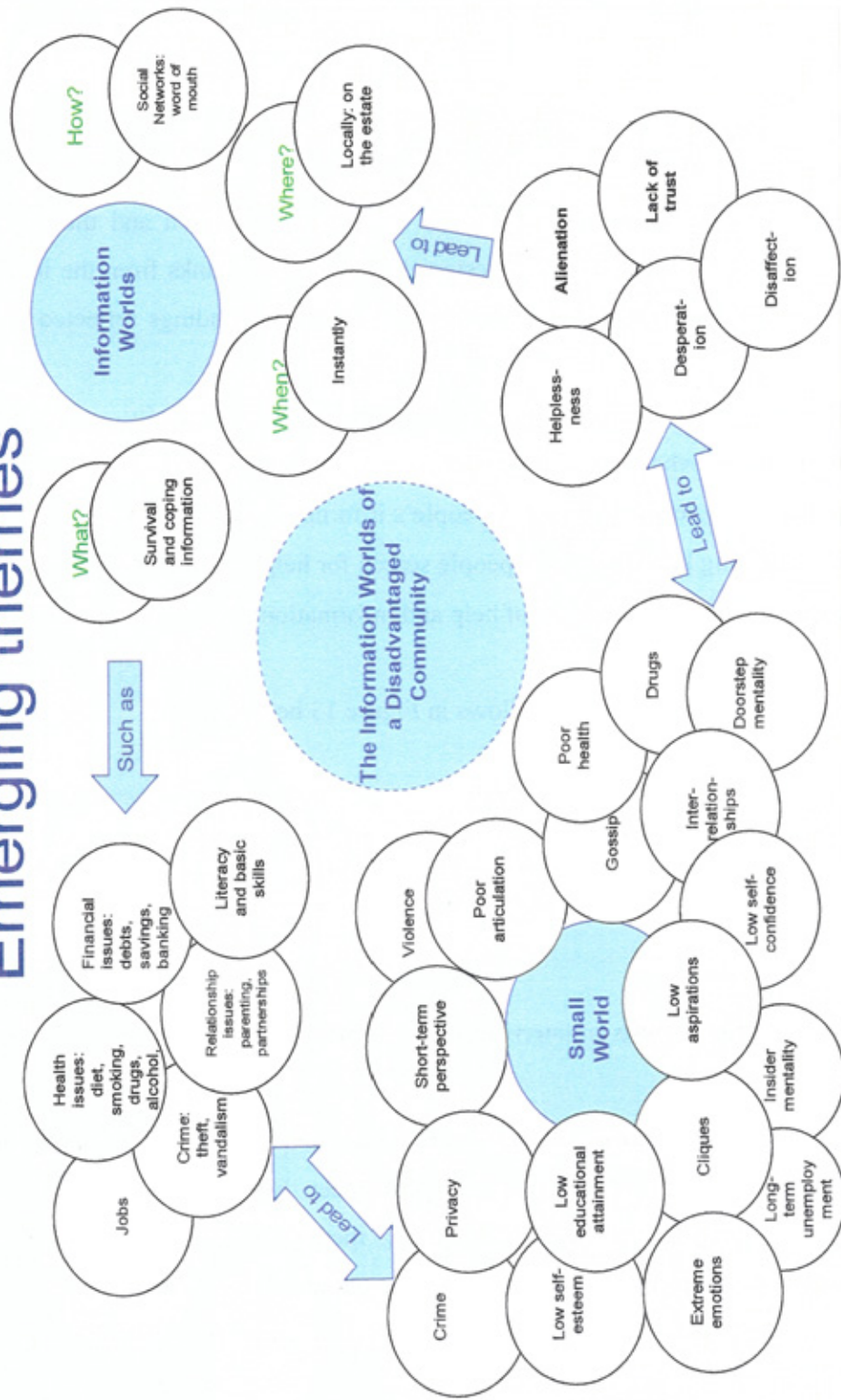


Figure 12 Mapping of emerging themes

#### 4.7.4 Step 4: a change of plan – tackling the data

At this point, the data started to become somewhat unmanageable because of the number of index cards plus 330 pages of observation data, and it became clear that a computerised method might at that point help make the data easier to search and the analysis more thorough. An Excel spreadsheet was designed to hold data chunks from the index cards. It was important at this stage to check that the spreadsheet headings reflected the research aims of:

- learning about everyday life in a disadvantaged community and how it affects information behaviour,
- presenting a detailed picture of people's information and help needs,
- investigating how and where people search for help and information, and
- exploring barriers to access of help and information.

The spreadsheet headings were as follows in Figure 13 below:

Participant's name	Transcript identifier number	Researcher comment	Theme	Nature of issue or problem	Help source	Attribute of help source	Barrier /Enabler	Help source ON/OFF estate.
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Figure 13 Spreadsheet headings for interviews database (information behaviour)

All interview data from the index cards were then entered into the spreadsheet. Each index card was assigned one line of the spreadsheet. In this way, it became simpler to manipulate the data and to search for specific themes or ideas. The first two columns comprised the participant's name and the transcript identifier number. Any comments the researcher needed to make relating to the chunk of data formed column 3. Column 4 showed the themes identified earlier in the analysis. The column 'nature of issue or problem' gave more detail, e.g., what type of information, help or advice need was described. 'Help source' indicated where (if at all) the participant had found help and the 'attribute' column identified what it was about the help source that was a barrier or enabler.

The column 'barrier/enabler' was simply to show whether there was either a barrier or an enabler involved in that issue, indicated by 'B' or 'E.'. Finally, the last column 'help source ON/OFF estate' represented whether help or information had been found on or off the estate.

During the manipulation and exploration of this spreadsheet, aspects of research participants' small world lives and their information seeking behaviour overlapped. Although these overlaps reaffirmed the belief that information behaviour and context were closely linked, it was also confusing, and in order to see the small world aspect more clearly, it was felt useful to separate the data temporarily in order to explore aspects of everyday life more fully. A second spreadsheet was therefore created, which took small world themes, including, for example, attitudes, hobbies and learning, out of the original spreadsheet to make a new 'small world' database. In this second spreadsheet, the headings are shown in Figure 14 below:

Participant name	Transcript Identifier number	Researcher comment	Theme	Details	Aspect
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Figure 14 Spreadsheet headings for 'small worlds' database

The sub-heading 'theme' gave more specific detail about small world aspects of their lives, so that, for example, a theme of *insularity* had a detail of *using the library* where the aspect was *outside cultural norms*. Another small world theme might have been *attitude* with a detail of *learning* and an aspect of *fear*. This spreadsheet was helpful but occasionally confusing as, for example, the theme of trust was both a theme in itself and an aspect of other themes like insularity.

Other data – participant observation and report data – were analysed by re-reading the transcripts several times and then by highlighting the themes already categorised from the interview data. The scripts were then read again to search for data that were not previously identified but seemed pertinent. This led to the emergence of two further categories, *attitudes toward rules and regulations* and *turbulent emotions*. These were



important categories as they gave insight into the mindset of people living in the community that did not emerge through the actual interview process.

#### 4.7.5 Step 5: back on track – data mapping

With the categories in place, the themes and concepts were mapped onto a large sheet of paper and linkages were drawn among them. The intent was to be able to see the themes holistically in order to analyse them and to explore potential links between them. Exploring themes and ideas visually in this way allowed the researcher to see the bigger picture, to begin to construct a whole case from all the individual components and to look for barriers and enablers to information seeking. The data map further provided a starting point from which to structure the presentation of the findings of the research. The themes were re-organised within four categories representing the four research questions to be answered. Separating the themes into discrete categories was difficult as there was overlap, as previously mentioned. So, for example, the theme of trust was a complex one as it impinged on many aspects of small world life. It was a product of an insular lifestyle but also was one of the factors giving rise to distrust of officials. Ultimately, trust was presented as a sub-category of small world insularity and as a barrier to access to information.

#### 4.7.6 Step 6: integration of data and writing the research

The final step in data analysis was to describe the patterns and themes narratively '*to make sense of the phenomenon you have studied*' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994: 145), and to attempt to move from them to develop theoretical propositions. Writing up the interpretation became part of the analytic process and, in some cases, categories were amended or moved, as the process itself gave the researcher further insights into the findings. In order to ensure that the constructs were sound, the researcher returned to the raw data during analysis and during writing up to check the findings were relevant to the aims and objectives and to ensure that nothing had been omitted.

The intent was to produce a rich picture of everyday life on the estate, and to reveal information behaviour and how it developed from everyday life. The result was a rich, illuminating picture of an information world. Information needs and sources were expressed as typologies supported with examples from everyday situations and using

participants' own words. Individual stories of everyday life and information behaviour are presented as vignettes in Appendix A.

Before moving from the data analysis to the findings, it is essential to consider an important aspect of naturalistic research, that of determining the trustworthiness of the research. This is described in the following sections.

## 4.8 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a fundamental issue in qualitative research (Guba, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Maxwell, 1996; Morse et al, 2002). The basic question regarding trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry is: *'How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?'* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 301). According to Ely et al (1991):

*Being trustworthy ... means ... that the processes of the research are carried out fairly, that the products represent as closely as possible the experiences of the people studied. The entire endeavour must be grounded in ethical principles about how data are collected and analyzed, how one's own assumptions and conclusions are checked, how participants are involved and how results are communicated (p.93).*

Trustworthiness is essential and the research must be credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable. The following sections address the ways in which the researcher achieved trustworthiness in the research.

### 4.8.1 Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that credibility is the most important criteria in establishing the trustworthiness of the research. Several techniques were used to ensure credibility of this study:

- *Prolonged engagement*: the researcher spent 18 months intensively in the field and continued to visit after the data collection was formally over.
- *Persistent observation*: the length of observation allowed the researcher to observe a wide range of lifestyle and information situations and avoid coming to premature conclusions.
- *Triangulation of methods*: Stake (1994) maintains that although no observation or interpretation can be repeated perfectly, *'triangulation serves ... to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen'* (p.241). Participant

observation as well as interviewing of estate residents and key workers took place. Information was also elicited from documentation such as reports and data about the estate in general.

- *Peer debriefing*: the researcher discussed all aspects of the research with fellow research students and with research supervisors in order to check the process was trustworthy.
- *Member checks*: research participants were invited to review and respond to a summary of the results of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider this to be the most important aspect of credible research.
- *Negative cases*: in this study, the researcher opted not to search for negative cases as it seemed inappropriate: in order to look for negative cases, generalisations would have had to be made about the findings. The participants' situations were individual and unique to them. Any surprises emerging from the findings are discussed in the appropriate sections.

#### 4.8.2 Transferability

The goal of interpretive research is to offer rich '*descriptive data*,' or '*thick description*' of the setting and/or the phenomenon (Patton, 1990) that are transferable to other situations in order to '*describe and to explain the patterns that exist, certainly not to discover general laws of human behaviour*' (Huberman and Miles, 2003: 173). Transferability does not involve broad claims, but invites readers of research to make connections between elements of a study and their own experience. As Erlandson et al (1993) explain, this is:

*Because transferability in a naturalistic study depends on similarities between sending and receiving contexts, the researcher collects sufficiently detailed descriptions of data in context and reports them with sufficient detail and precision to allow judgements about transferability (p.33).*

The stance taken in this study was that although the context in this study was necessarily unique, the setting could be interpreted as typical; therefore the reader could make a link between their own set of circumstances and those offered in this study. This connection can be made only be made by the reader since '*every context is by definition different, an intersection of a host of nameless factors*' (Dervin, 1997: 14). The use of thick description of the setting and verbatim quotation in this study allows for transferability of particular results to other similar situations.

### 4.8.3 Dependability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability can be determined through the use of an audit trail. The audit trail allows the research processes to be reconstructed, allowing the reader to *'walk people through your work from beginning to end, so that they can understand the path you took'* (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994: 146). The strategies used for selecting people to observe, interview and include in the study have been clearly presented, and a record of the inquiry process, including copies of all taped interviews, notes from interviews and discussions, and hard copies of all transcripts, has been maintained. The researcher also kept a log in which to record all thoughts, ideas, problems and issues that cropped up during the research process. The log was used as a post-analysis check to ensure that all themes and ideas had been incorporated and accounted for in the data presentation.

### 4.8.4 Confirmability

In positivist research, there is an emphasis on an unbiased objective approach by the researcher. Such objectivity is neither possible nor desirable in interpretivist enquiry; however, it is necessary for the researcher to acknowledge personal prejudices and values (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and to recognise that they themselves are part of the research process. Maykut and Morehouse (1994), aware that the term subjective can imply lack of rigour, prefer the term *perspectival* (p.20) to describe the more subjective approach taken by interpretivists. In this study, disciplined analysis, interpretation and presentation of data ensured that the results could be traced back to the raw data via the audit trail, thus confirming the research findings and grounding the results in the data. The reflective review of the research (Chapter 9) also recounts the researcher's experience in conducting the research.

## 4.9 Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to an awareness of self as it relates to the research process. Fetterman (1989) suggests qualitative researchers, *'... cannot be completely neutral. We are all products of our culture. We have personal beliefs, biases, and individual tastes. Socialization runs deep'* (p.22). However, by making any biases explicit, the researcher can guard against them. On occasion during the fieldwork, the researcher had to stand back and

re-evaluate her feelings about, e.g., problematic family relationships, raising children and the role of women, and ensure that personal feelings did not influence the research. Reflexivity is also apparent in our account of the research process and the way in which we acknowledge that our interpretation of the subject under scrutiny can only ever be partial. As Berger (1963) notes:

*We are encouraged to be reflexive in our account of the research process, the data collected and the way we write it up, because reflexivity shows the partial nature of our representation of reality, the multiplicity of competing versions of reality (p.129).*

Reflexivity can further be demonstrated by acknowledging our ethical concerns and by reflecting directly on the methods, the analysis and the results of the research. As Sword (1999) suggests:

*Reflection on the influence of self not only creates personal awareness of how the research is shaped by one's own biography but also provides a context within which audiences can more fully understand the researcher's interpretation of text data (p.270).*

Ethical concerns are outlined in the following section, and the researcher's reflections on the research are described in chapter 9.

#### 4.10 Ethical concerns

Throughout the research process, care was taken to ensure that ethical conventions were adhered to. It was important that research participants did not feel manipulated or taken advantage of in any way, and any ethical concerns arising during the research stemmed from this overarching concern. Sarantakos (1998) advises consideration of several issues in relationship to those researched:

- Proper identification – the researcher should properly identify herself to the respondents. *(The researcher introduced herself or was introduced to all community centre members and staff.)*
- Clear outset – the researcher should tell respondents about the questions and about any consequences of the questions or the research itself upon the respondent. *(The research was explained regularly to the respondents.)*

- Welfare of the respondent – this should always be of primary consideration. (*The researcher took care to ask the respondents how they felt about the interviews, to help them feel as comfortable as possible and to maintain an active interest in their lives.*)
- Free and informed consent – never pressure respondents into the research and always ensure they are clear about the research purpose (*Respondents were assured of anonymity and also told they could leave or stop the interview whenever they wanted.*)
- Right to privacy – respect respondents' privacy including their right not to answer questions. (*Again, respondents were told to answer only questions they felt comfortable with, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured.*)
- The right to anonymity – respondents should not be identifiable through the data. (*This was a dilemma, as the researcher had concerns that descriptions of research participants' lives might have enabled identification within the community; names of respondents were changed to help diminish this problem.*)
- The right to confidentiality – any information the researcher obtains should not be available to anyone outside of the research. (*The researcher discussed sensitive aspects of the research only within her academic peer group.*) (p.23-24)

It was important that nobody was 'rendered vulnerable, responsible or exposed' (Weis et al, 2000: 65) by the research, and ethical considerations were continuously reflected upon and put into effect.

#### 4.11 Chapter summary

*This chapter explained and justified the methodological approach used by the researcher, and outlined the sample selection and the research methods used, including the way in which the data were analysed. A naturalistic framework was most suited to the research questions, which were concerned with exploring the information behaviour of 'disadvantaged' people in their everyday lives and the ways their lives influenced their information behaviour. The research methods were chosen to suit the dynamics of the context and were based on ethnographic data collection methods: narrative interviews underpinned by participant observation. Formative data collection and analysis occurred concurrently so that ideas and emerging themes could be fed back into subsequent data*

*collection. Finally, the ways in which the rigour of the research process was assured were explained.*

*The remaining chapters of the thesis are concerned with the research findings, a reflective review of the research process and discussion and conclusions stemming from the findings. The chapter following describes the culture of the estate and begins to make links between everyday life and information behaviour.*

## 5 Everyday life in the community

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the setting for the fieldwork and then moves on to describe everyday life on the estate in order to address the research objective of:

*learning about everyday life in a 'disadvantaged' community and how it affects information behaviour.*

Information behaviour is socially constructed (Johnson et al, 2006) and in order to discover participants' information needs and their information seeking behaviour, it was necessary to explore the ways they lived their everyday lives. The research participants comprised estate residents and key workers; however, in the following sections, the term *research participants* refers to the 21 residents who were interviewed as they were felt to be the focus of the project; the key workers are referred to simply as *key workers*, and other estate residents are referred to as *residents*.

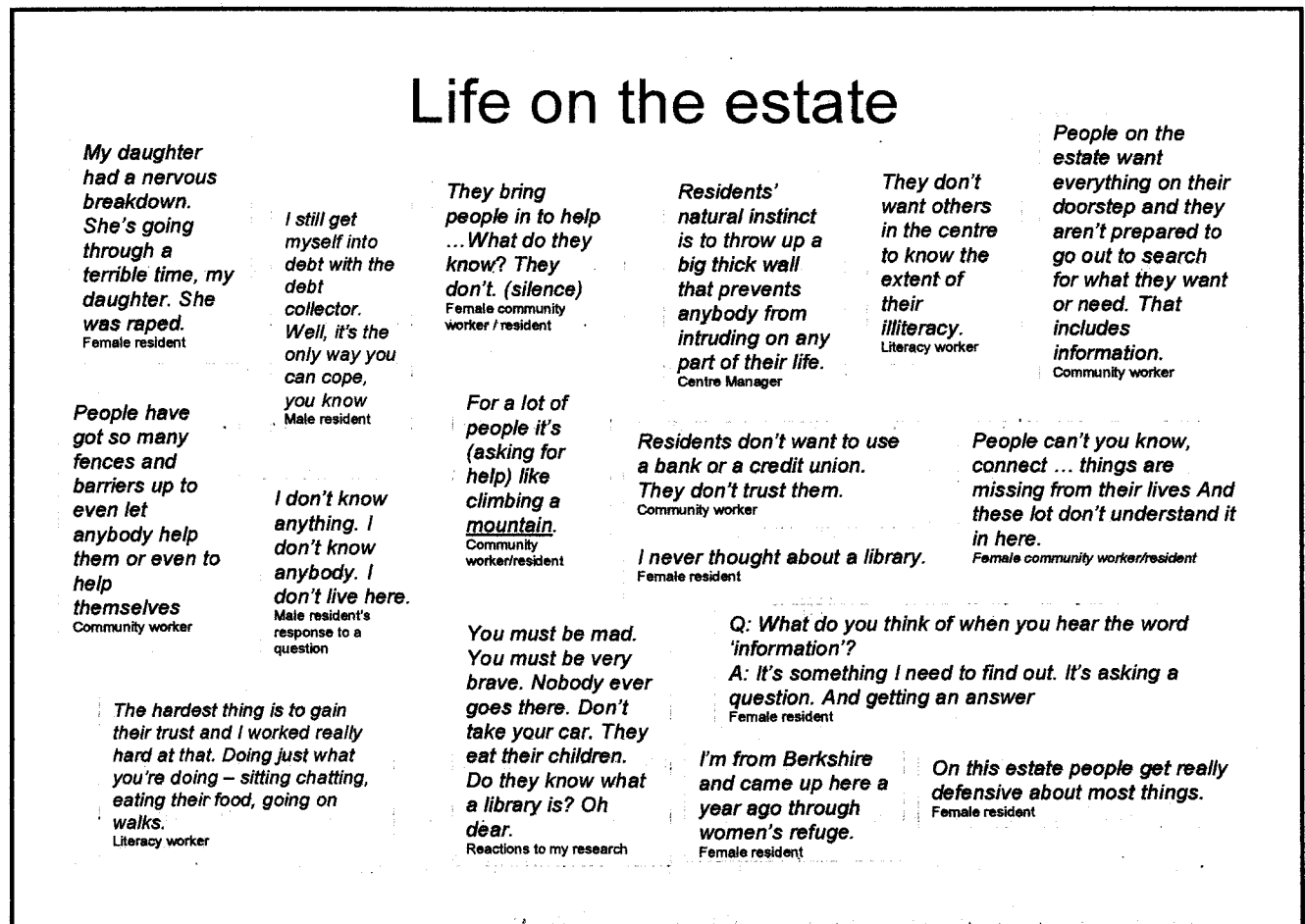
### 5.2 The community setting

Over the past 20 years, there have been many social and economic changes in Northeast England. De-industrialisation and the accompanying decline of industries such as shipbuilding, steel making and coal mining have affected the area in profound ways and have left many individuals and communities struggling. One such community was the setting for the fieldwork in this research (see also Section 4.5.1).

The community was located at the edge of a relatively prosperous town in the Northeast on an estate, which was one of the worst 10% in the UK according to Indices of Multiple Deprivation (DETR, 2000) figures. There had been significant investment of government funding to try to eradicate social exclusion and its ensuing problems. A seven-year SRB-funded regeneration scheme provided over £13M for the community, and in December 2000, a £600K community resource centre opened on the estate. The community centre became the point of access for the fieldwork. It was very modern, clean and sunny with lots of glass and wood, and was accessed through a side door that led to a reception office, which in turn gave into a bright open café.



To present a flavour of life on the estate, the comments in Figure 15 reveal aspects of research participants' small worlds, including problems and attitudes, workers' perceptions of the estate and local stigma about the estate.



**Figure 15** Life on the estate

The people of this community were the focus of the research. The everyday lives of the 21 individuals interviewed are revealed in vignettes (see Appendix A), which also describe aspects of their information behaviour. Over 18 months of fieldwork were spent with the participants during which time they were observed and interviewed.

Within the community centre many activities were available, such as an art group, bingo sessions, a local history class, basic skills classes, computer skills classes and women's and men's groups. The centre also provided a laundry, a crèche and a fitness

suite, and access to key workers such as a social worker, a children's worker, a community development worker, a health nurse and three community resource team members. The centre was managed by a former community librarian, but was staffed and developed by community residents and key workers. There were several volunteers working in the centre. However, by the end of the fieldwork, only one social worker and one volunteer coordinator remained, although a new manager was appointed in spring 2004.

Partnership working between agencies and the centre was successful to a degree but was dependent on short-term funding, which resulted in workers becoming established within the community and then having to leave. More effective, long-term, imaginative and wider partnership working might have produced more positive outcomes. Partnership working with the local library took place at the instigation of the researcher and the basic skills instructor, and this resulted in two public library visits. Partnership working was not sustained in this instance.

#### 5.2.1 Information resources in the community centre

The community resource centre was a place where residents could access various types of information in several ways – through expert workers, through the community newsletter, via the Internet and through informational posters. The manager hoped to improve information resources by forging links with the public library and by setting up a small library within the centre to cater to residents' needs. She also planned to have various information leaflets available on a turn-around display. However, none of these initiatives materialised. The centre published a newsletter that was distributed to every household on the estate; however, this ended when funding ran out. Because of the nature of funding, the manager had to focus on bidding for funds and had no time to manage and organise information resources, and there was no one else willing or able to perform the role. There were also informational notice boards within the café, but residents complained that they were not kept up-to-date.

Many external agencies worked with the community centre providing a variety of expert workers and their services, including two employment advisors, two youth workers, two social workers, a community development worker, two housing officers and a community support worker, among many more. The local college provided a basic skills trainer and a computer skills trainer. There was access to a variety of help and information

in the community centre, but because of the cliques within the community and a general estate culture of insularity and apathy, very few estate residents actually used it to its potential.

The description of the community centre provides the setting to the small world life of the estate, which is described more fully in the following section.

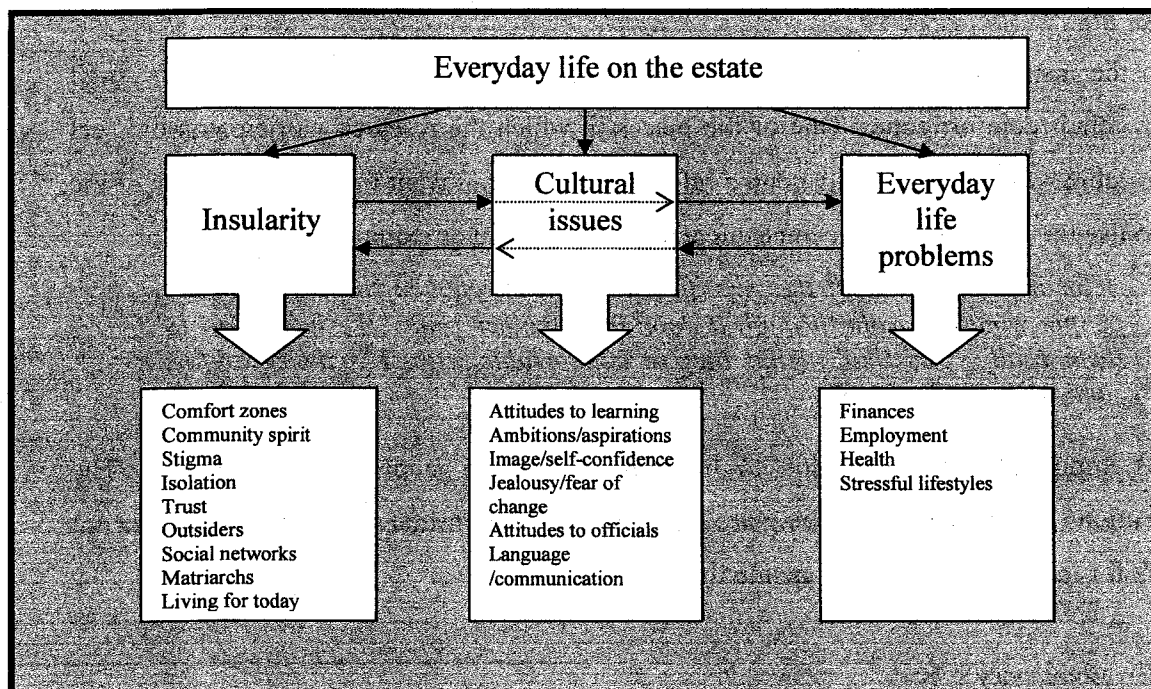
### 5.3 Everyday small worlds

Although an attempt was made to tease out and present discrete aspects of participants' small worlds, life cannot be forced into discrete sections, since the various aspects influence each other and are inter-related and complex. The sections that follow describe everyday life on the estate and explore the insular nature, the cultural attitudes and the everyday life problems of people living there. The three key areas link to some of the comments presented earlier in Figure 15.

Everyday life was difficult for many research participants, because *'in a culture of unemployment, helplessness and low expectations. Residents find it really difficult to cope'* (O32-1). The need for information, help and support was continuous, as a key worker describes:

*We're talking about this class of people who are on benefits, that are sort of bordering on criminality, it's very, very difficult, and that brings with it all sorts of other problems: health problems, housing problems, welfare problems, hygiene problems, you know, drug problems, and it's just massive. I think these people need years of support. I think they need generations of support. (W/AM4/5)*

Figure 16 shows the three central aspects of everyday life that were significant in terms of their influence on information behaviour along with their specific attributes. The horizontal arrows indicate the inter-linked nature of the three main aspects.



**Figure 16 Aspects of small world lives impacting information behaviour**

### 5.3.1 Insularity

*... I call it the ghetto: they think the universe ends at (main) Road, and it begins at the corner up here. Never been anywhere; never experienced life outside. Never been abroad; been to (town) a few times. Been to the (shopping centre) a couple of times. But that's it. That's their life ... born, bred, live, die, wed, on the estate. They'd never leave the estate. Their universe starts there and it ends there. (Alan, police officer, W/AM5, W/AM11.)*

For many estate residents their small world was bounded by the limits of the estate. The estate was shunned by the wider community and insular in itself. People felt stigmatised by the external community and tended to keep problems, issues, secrets and relationships within the estate, and sometimes from each other. People attempted to satisfy information and help needs within the estate and, as a resident describes, looked outside of the community only to resolve serious problems:

*We like to keep our own business on the estate. Don't know why that is. Maybe cos we've always been the outcasts...I think we always keep our business inside, (K13) ... here people are all helping each other (K21).*

#### 5.3.1.1 Comfort zones

Given the insular nature of the estate, residents felt uncomfortable outside of their small world – their comfort zones. One of the places in which the research participants did feel comfortable was the community centre café, but they did not want to leave the safety of the café to use the computer room; consequently, the literacy tutor explained:

*A lot of the early stuff that we did was concentrated in the café because people wouldn't walk through a door into another room. We had to go to them really. Cos that's what they're comfortable with. It's their comfort zone, isn't it? (W/SJ13)*

It was important for information to be available where people felt comfortable. The implications for information seeking are clear: people in an insular community will tend not to look for information sources outside their comfort zones.

#### 5.3.1.2 Community spirit

*There's some brilliant people here. Janet who lost her son to drugs; they went round collecting and they'll have raised quite a bit of money to give to that woman. A young girl, about three, four year back, lost everything in her house; they went round collecting; they must have raised £500 for that lass. So, it's there, because the empathy's there, you know. (MA11)*

Because of the insularity and the restricted nature of the social networks on the estate, there was a strong sense of people taking care of each other within the community. Although most residents lived on benefits and had personal and financial problems, they were giving and generous to those in need. There was the feeling that everyone had suffered some form of hardship and those experiences encouraged them to help others who were going through difficult times.

#### 5.3.1.3 Stigma

*(This estate is) ... head and shoulders the most deprived estate in the county: education, crime, dereliction, the police point of view. Residents are aware of the poor reputation of the estate and the stigma attached to living there. (Patrick, social worker, W/P5)*

Associated with the insular nature of the estate and its social problems was the stigma towards it from the wider community. Locally, the estate was maligned and feared because

of its reputation: it was the 'bogeyman' of the area. This had a negative impact for some people living there; John said he felt 'downtrodden' (O74-5) because when he told people where he lived, they always responded with '*horror, and that makes me feel really bad*' (O74-5). The local belief was '*if you're from X Road estate, you're a nobody*' (MA12/13).

#### 5.3.1.4 Isolation

*I'd say isolation was a big problem. And feeling useless. Self-esteem. Isolation. A lot of emotional problems. A lot of emotional baggage. And money. I wouldn't say that many people on this estate didn't have worries about money. That's basically your typical problems. And they feel isolated for the fact that they're afraid to tell anybody on this estate that because they know it'll get round the estate. They have nobody they can trust.* (W/MT/10)

The stigmatisation of the estate and its insularity contributed towards its isolation, and isolation was a problem for many. Some felt isolated not only from the larger world, but also within the estate because of internal frictions and because of worries about disclosure of personal information. People felt isolated by their problems and were too proud, embarrassed or ashamed to reveal those problems to others, including friends and family. This made communication of problems and issues difficult, and presented a paradox: although the people felt and said that everyone on the estate helped others in the community, in practice it did not always happen. This was also an important issue for information providers to acknowledge – many people were reluctant to admit to or discuss the problems they were experiencing. It took time to get to know people in order to be able to offer help, information and advice. Personal information was private information, and residents did not want people to know about personal aspects of their lives unless they chose to disclose them. Information providers need to be aware of this sensitivity towards personal questions.

#### 5.3.1.5 Trust

*A lot of people don't give trust out, not round here. I'll be surprised if you get many to do this [i.e., interview] People think: back off, back off. They think if you say something you'll be known as a grass. People think: what information? What am I doing? They've probably had interviews with other people who say: we're not passing it on. Next thing you know, it's right across the paper. People won't take the chance.* (Sharon, resident, S19)

As Sharon describes, trust was a major concern for the research participants. Several issues related to trust, including the importance of keeping personal information private, the fear of outsiders, the insular nature of the estate and concerns about bureaucracy. To resolve help and information needs, residents had to trust the information source. However, trust was one of the biggest barriers to overcome on the estate, and distrust was the norm. Trust was crucial between residents and the outside world, and Lillian's remarks were typical:

*You've got to be very wary, haven't you? It takes time. I've got to really, really get to know them. You know what I mean? Because I get really nervous. I do, I get really nervous and agitated.* (Lillian, resident, LJ7)

Many of us trust official agencies to provide us with the information we seek because of their perceived reputation or expertise. However, research participants tended not to do this, because of their insular lives and because of negative experiences with official sources. The exception to this was for health information or in dire circumstances, e.g., for debt information. Instead, people placed their trust in friends and family and in trusted workers who might not, in fact, have had the expert answer. This sometimes resulted in mis-information.

#### 5.3.1.6 Outsiders

*Gerry: What I notice on this estate, they don't like strangers. They don't take to strangers like. You know, you've got to be careful. They get a bit worried about strangers. They've set two people on in the office. Nobody's very happy about it. Things like that you've got to be very careful.*

*Me: Why don't they like the two people in the office?*

*Gerry: Why 'cos they're strangers.*

*Me: Are they from the estate?*

*Gerry: They've just moved onto the estate. See? They don't know them.*  
(GY10/11)

Because of the insular nature of the estate and lack of trust, research participants, like Gerry, viewed outsiders (or strangers or foreigners, as they were called) with suspicion. I was often reminded, albeit in a gentle and ironic manner, that I was a 'foreigner.' It took time and effort to even start to be accepted into the community. Lillian explained that people would not talk to me initially because '*they're frightened until they get to know you*' (LJ30/31). The implications for information providers are clear: gaining trust is essential to be able to help people, and gaining trust takes time, friendliness and effort.

#### 5.3.1.7 Social networks

*There's a very, very strong sense of community. Because everybody's born and bred there, everybody knows everybody else. That's one thing: you live there, you marry there, you die there. (Alan, estate police officer, W/AM23)*

Social networks tended to be located within the community because of the insular nature of the estate, and were generally limited to family, friends and, for some, trusted regeneration workers on the estate. Regeneration workers provided links to the larger community and increased research participants' social capital. Estate residents' constricted social networks restricted their access to help and information:

*Who they work with and family and friends are first to help them find out. And ... you tend to have family networks here who live close by and it's rare that somebody is outside the estate ... But inevitably they'll hit that ceiling where nobody knows what to do and that's I guess where people like me come in. If it's over the road, you can use it; if it's two miles away, therefore it's inconvenient and they might not use it. People are in, I mean, people are in really bad situations here on this estate, financially primarily and they're in a complete mess, because they haven't, because it's been secret in a sense, you don't want it to be out and you don't want people to know about it, therefore you restrict what you can tell or ask for help for. So that's one thing, but I do think that it's simply been that it's in the bigger world that you need to go out to get information. And they've never made that jump so therefore haven't bothered, so therefore they're in a bad situation. (Joe, community development worker, W/JK10/11)*

Problems such as debts were kept secret, which meant that help was not generally sought outside of their narrow networks. Social networks were the main method of communicating information but there were limitations and it was difficult for information and help providers to break down the barriers in order to be able to help.

#### 5.3.1.8 The matriarchal influence

There was a group of powerful women on the estate who were influential and to whom others would go for information and advice. Within the estate culture, it was important to gain the endorsement of the matriarchs, as the children's worker explained:

*They are as rough as they come. Very hard women. June X ... erm, how would I describe her? I've been told that she dishes out money and stuff like that. She has quite a hold over a lot of people on this estate. And they're quite frightened of her. (W/MT/14)*



Another of the women *'works as a moneylender on the estate. I don't think she's in the drugs racket but her sons are. Everybody on the estate takes notice of her, or else'* (O51-2). Some of these women were able to exert a positive force, which the education welfare officer felt was under-utilised as a resource:

*The grans hold a lot of power and I feel if they'd been drafted in they could have whipped their families in line (W/K7) ... they have a way of dealing with things and making things happen. (W/K17)*

#### 5.3.1.9 Living for the day

*Residents live one day at a time; they don't plan ahead. I've organised courses or organised to collect people to take them for interviews and they don't show up. They don't plan further than the end of the day. (Karla, employment advisor, W/K2.)*

Life on the estate tended to be on a day-to-day basis, with little forward planning. There were many examples of the effects of this phenomenon. The following observation was an example: one of the volunteer cooks asked the community centre manager, Lorna, for money to buy food to make the meal:

*Lorna asked [him] why the cooks hadn't planned the menu ahead of time so that everything would have been ready beforehand. John said he didn't know. So, she gave him the money and he went off to buy the food. Later on, he came in again to request more money to buy potatoes. Lorna asked him why he needed potatoes when the dish for the day was quiche and salad. John said the one of the residents had asked for baked potatoes. (O90-1)*

One of the associated effects was that people found it difficult to make a commitment:

*Commitment I think is a barrier. Not committing themselves to long periods of time. It's kind of why we did some short, five-week bursts. I think a lot of people can't see what they'll be doing in 10 weeks' time. So anything that comes in, if you're talking about more than six weeks, it's: oh, I'm not sure, you know? People are reluctant to committing to the long-term. There's a certain inflexibility. (Sally, basic skills instructor, W/SJ14)*

There was a paradox: on the one hand, residents did not want to commit long-term to taking up learning or to plan the menu for the café in advance, but conversely, they were creatures of habit: if it was Tuesday afternoon, it was bingo. In such an environment, it was difficult to introduce new ideas or opportunities, as if they were outside of the normal daily routine they were often resisted.

### 5.3.2 Cultural issues

#### 5.3.2.1 Attitudes to learning

*There's still a stigma attached to learning on the estate. I got a lot of stick when I started uni, 'who do you think you are?' They don't like to think that you're trying to be better than them. People saying: 'What are you doing that for? Who do you think you are? Why, that's a waste of time.' I don't know if it's a fear of failing in front of everybody else. Or it's just that they don't want you to be better than them. (Lesley, resident, LB5)*

Lesley was harassed because of her involvement with learning. Attitudes towards learning were important to consider, as often the residents who were pro-learning who were also the most active information seekers and information intermediaries, since learning brought self-confidence. Residents had mixed feelings towards learning, often stemming from difficult experiences during childhood together with an estate culture of negativity and jealousy towards learning and self-improvement:

*... for these people, school is just so alien to them. And they pass that on to their children without even realising that they're passing it on, you know, that distrust of school, distrust of teachers, distrust of the whole education system really. And you have to be careful not to tie yourself into that too closely. (Sally, basic skills instructor, W/SJ15/16)*

However, the culture was slowly changing. Learning tailored towards residents' interests was successful: the local history class had upwards of 15 people attending. The basic skills class, initially attended by three or four people, increased to 10 or more when the tutor changed the focus of the class to local history. Even though not everyone took up learning opportunities, people began to see learning as a possibility.

#### 5.3.2.2 Ambitions and aspirations

*You've heard that expression: where there's a will, there's a way? Well, here there's no will and no way. (Joe, community development worker, O90-2)*

Ambitions and aspirations linked strongly with attitudes to learning. Although the statement above was a generalisation, it reflected the overall culture of the estate. Some residents were ambitious for a better life but many had few ambitions, as life was lived day-to-day with no thought for the future. Some had ambitions to go to college and university such as

Lesley, Janet and Jim (see vignettes, Appendix A). Those who managed to achieve their goals tended to leave the estate. One woman left having gained her NVQ, and a couple, who had both taken up local training opportunities and found employment, '*left and bought a house over in [neighbouring area]*' (O90-2).

#### 5.3.2.3 Image and self-confidence

*A fear of the unknown ... that's what people suffer from here, so therefore they'll not do things just in case it isn't the right image. They don't make that link that they might learn something, they'd rather just stay ignorant and important. ... people here have to consider their peers, their status in the community, all this sort of thing, before they can make a leap to do anything.* (Joe, W/JK14)

Joe, the community development worker, believed that people did not begin to reach their potential because they were afraid of how others in the community would see them. People were insecure and afraid of change and commonly expressed their fears through teasing. Lesley discovered that when she wore smart clothes, she was heckled, and when she was seen reading a book, she was taunted.

#### 5.3.2.4 Jealousy and fear of change

*I've heard comments in there, when people have gone on training course or found a job. It's jealousy. I mean, they're rising up aren't they? Leaving them behind. They're working, so, you know.* (Patrick, social worker, W/P7)

Associated with image and self-confidence were jealousy and fear of change. Employment, information and learning brought power and change, which were often threatening for people. Patrick recalled: '*when Phil first got his job, he was late for men's group. He was heckled and teased by the others and eventually he stopped going*' (O90-2).

Rather than supporting family members and friends in their learning, people often tried to sabotage their efforts. Agnes, a café volunteer, had learnt numbers and was able to use the cash register; however, her daughter '*went crazy at me and told me not to interfere in her mother's life*' (O32-1), said the centre manager. Agnes later stopped coming in to the centre.

#### 5.3.2.5 Attitudes towards officials and bureaucracy

*These lot don't understand it in here. But we understand it because we've lived here. They bring in people like [the manager]. But what do they know, when you daren't use your last £1 because you need your last £1 to put in your meter to keep your bairns warm. What do they know? They don't. (Marion, resident, MA6/7)*

Some research participants felt that most official types could neither understand nor empathise with residents' difficulties in their everyday lives as they were not from the estate. Although officials met regularly in the community centre, few of them came into the café to chat with residents (O29-5). An information gap, with neither side understanding the other's issues, perpetuated the 'us' and 'them' culture. Lillian said, '*I don't like meetings. I'm always worried about what to say*' (O61-2). Krissy similarly lacked confidence when dealing with professionals, and she explained:

*I'm not self-confident with other people ... Other people scare me, like professionals scare me. Because [they] knew what [they] were talking about and I didn't. I had confidence with my own people, my own class, but going to people I didn't know, professionals ... terrified. It took Meg a long time to get me to talk to people and realise they were no better than me. (K12/13)*

Residents needed information about how to conduct meetings and they needed assertiveness training to know how to participate and to feel more comfortable.

#### 5.3.2.6 Attitudes towards rules

Associated with attitudes towards bureaucracy were attitudes towards rules. Although residents disliked the imposition of rules and regulations by others, they were often quick to enforce rules themselves. This paradoxical stance sometimes caused conflict in the community centre. Residents were annoyed at what they saw as petty rules and regulations; June described how she felt:

*If you put a poster up now you have to have permission. You think you're back at school: please miss, may I put this up? It's the way she treats you though. She should treat you like adults, not like children. (JS7/8)*

This observation was important for information behaviour, as it was in many ways a power issue – residents found the imposition of petty rules and regulations threatening, as it emphasised the imbalance of power.

### 5.3.2.7 Language and communication

#### 5.3.2.7.1 An indigenous language?

There appeared to be an idiosyncratic language or way of speaking on the estate that was impenetrable to me. The IT instructor remarked, *'it's difficult to talk to people here; I think they have a language of their own on this estate'* (O10-4). I often felt alienated from conversations, that *'go on around me that I have no idea about'* (O12-1), and found *'I often don't have a clue what people are talking about when it seems obvious to everyone else, and it's not just semantics, even when I understand the words, I don't understand the context'* (O23-3). This was another example of the 'outsider' syndrome and also an indication that in order to help people in this community, time to get to know and understand people and their environments was essential.

#### 5.3.2.7.2 Literacy

Literacy difficulties were commonplace and made life difficult for some. Alex, who was illiterate, felt unable to participate in anything associated with reading, books or words. I organised a trip to the local library, and Alex said, *'you know why I can't go'* (O70-2) when I invited him. Literacy difficulties also meant that people found reading and completing complex forms and understanding official language difficult. These difficulties led to residents feeling inadequate and disempowered (this is discussed further in barriers to information access). Information format was thus important – clear, understandable language was needed.

In spite of the general literacy problems, four of the research participants were avid readers, and one mother read to her children. Lesley realised that her love of reading made her different, and said, *'if they see us reading a book, they'll be thinking: who does she think she is?'* (LB10), but this did not stop her.

#### 5.3.2.7.3 Patronising language

Research participants expressed a dislike of big words, which were scary and unfamiliar. However, there was somewhat of a paradox, as people also disliked the use of what they saw as patronising, child-like language and attitudes.

#### 5.3.2.7.4 Communication

Residents lacked articulacy, which often led to outbursts and arguments. A community worker suggested that *'people find it very difficult to articulate what they want to say'* (O32-5). He said one of the young kitchen volunteers could not verbalise her problems and she would cry and run away. People's reactions often seemed extreme in comparison with the situation. Associated with this was swearing, which was a natural part of communication within the community: all ages, from two to 72, swore as a matter of course. The estate police office asked, *'have you sensed the difference of communication skills on the estate? Do you pick up a lot of people swear all the time?'* (W/AM22).

#### 5.3.2.7.5 Semantic barriers

There was low take-up of learning opportunities in the community centre. One resident believed that semantic barriers explained this and was convinced that the word *'courses'* put people off because of negative associations with school. The cultural associations of learning were negative and frightening. She remarked, *'If you say, come and learn, people panic on this estate,'* as people assume that taking courses involve reading and writing and that *'scares the hell out of people'* (SA5/6). It was difficult to introduce learning opportunities in such an unreceptive environment.

### 5.3.3 Everyday problems in the community

#### 5.3.3.1 Finances

*I think they are socially excluded. By cash. Lack of status. You go to your bank manager: I fancy a nice holiday. Where do you work? What do you do? ... they haven't even got a bank account. They save with me, a quid a week. No bank accounts. Massively disadvantaged. Now when you go to get a bank account – have you got a passport, a driver's license? No. Sorry. But they accept it. They don't even realise it. (Patrick, social worker, W/P9)*

Lack of money and associated debt problems were everyday facts for many on the estate. Residents tended not to have bank accounts, and they did not have the necessary official documentation to open one. Only one research participant had a bank account, although many saved £1 a week with the community savings group. It was also difficult for people to access credit because of the postcode.

In 2003, a credit union opened on the estate after much debate among the community, who did not trust something new and unknown. The savings club felt safe and familiar and meant that people did not have to leave their comfort zones. Lillian's concerns about the credit union were echoed by others in the community: *'They're not lending my money out; it's my money. I just don't trust it. What if something goes wrong?'* (O88-3).

Another resident said, *'I heard that the person who ran the last one took off the money. I don't trust it'* (O89-1). In fact, there had been no credit union on the estate previously, and this was an example of gossip leading to mis-information.

#### 5.3.3.2 Employment

*A lot of people just don't want jobs. They do various training courses because they can then get extra money, but they actually don't want to work as the culture of the community is one of not working.* (Keith, education welfare officer, W/K4)

Unemployment was a way of life for many on the estate, although some on the estate had gained employment in a new local superstore that had opened in 2002. Wider employment would have brought affluence to people living on the estate and social capital through contact with other people and other lives. The culture of unemployment was a difficult one to overcome. Some participants felt it made economic sense to remain unemployed and said they got more money in benefits than for working (O47-2).

#### 5.3.3.3 Health

Physical and mental health problems were common. During a Health Day at the centre, a nurse measured participants' blood pressure and almost everyone there had high blood pressure. Poor health was common; Annie, a 40-year-old, pregnant woman, was the lone parent of two daughters and she was also a grandmother. She said her younger daughter had a problem with her spine and her older daughter had recently recovered from throat cancer. She said, *'Here I am: 40 and a grandma and expecting my own child, and now I'm on my own again. It never stops; if it's not one thing it's another'* (O69-1). There was an acceptance of ill health as part of the way of life. Although heavily pregnant, Annie, like many others on the estate, continued to smoke.

Several residents had mental health problems. Eileen suffered mental abuse from her husband; she was trying to help her daughter deal with rape, and she was experiencing extreme grief over her mother's death (O20-3). Several women were trying to move forward from violent relationships. Another male resident felt alone and vulnerable because his parents and siblings had all died of heart problems. Again, this was accepted as the way things were and that nothing could be done to change it.

#### 5.3.3.4 Stressful lifestyles

*They can't manage their children. Can't control their children. Financial problems. Gas, electric. Evictions. Form-filling. They're the main ones. High turnover. Problems. Violence. Coming out of care. Her majesty's pleasure. I wish I had a pound for every one I've had in my office: out of mental institutions, out of her majesty, fleeing violence. A lot here fleeing violence, you know. And that in turn creates problems. I think if you could get a better social balance. Get people in waged employment, you know. (Patrick, social worker, W/P7.)*

Life was stressful for many people because of the issues described above. Day-to-day life was beset with both practical and emotional problems, all of which demanded a response involving information and support. The children's worker described the kinds of issues she had dealt with:

*I've dealt with a resident being harassed because she was involved in a murder years ago. I've dealt with domestic violence. I've dealt with child protection issues. I've dealt with people wanting to learn. I've dealt with self-esteem issues. I've dealt with people struggling to deal with what's happened to them in the past and they just want someone to talk to about it. Anything really. Anything. You just don't know what's going to walk through that door. (Meg, children's worker, W/MT1.)*

These and other aspects of everyday life contributed towards a life that was generally stressful.

##### 5.3.3.4.1 Crime

*There's gangs roaming round after dark drinking, criminal damage. They can't have a nice garden because they get plants nicked, you know, that's what it's really like. There's criminality and drug-taking and that's the situation. (Alan, estate police officer, W/AM16.)*



In spite of a reduction in crime figures, some residents still felt unsafe on the estate. Sharon said she felt safer although she was *'always worried about a certain family. You'd only have to say boo to them and that's it, your windows would go through. Eggs thrown at my windows, I had many a time'* (S3). Petty crime was common: attempted break-ins and incidents of vandalism were common and the police refused to come out any more (O14-2). One participant described how youths put lit paper through his letterbox to torment him and had once tried to set fire to him (O24-2). Community centre staff had their tyres let down on several occasions (O20-1). There was a sense of fatalism about such negative aspects of everyday life.

#### 5.3.3.4.2 Violence

Three of the women using the community centre had lived in the women's refuge before moving onto the estate. None spoke explicitly about the violence within their previous relationships, as they said they wanted to move forwards with their lives. Helen said she did not know where to turn after *'... a man has mentally abused you and tortured you'* (O56-3) *... He tried to strangle me loads of times and I used to try to find the right words to say but there were no right words and even silence was wrong 'cos he would still beat me up'* (O73-2). She fled the abusive relationship and left her family in the south of England. She said the violence she had experienced had left her living in fear and unable to trust anyone: *'I always put up a barrier'* (O73-2).

The education welfare officer told many stories of violence on the estate. However, although he had been shot at (W/K5), generally he felt safe. He told of a couple who moved onto the estate and were seen as aloof and unfriendly: *'their windows were all painted with black dust. If you want to shut yourselves off, we'll shut you off'* (W/K8).

#### 5.3.3.4.3 Drugs

Although drugs were part of the estate culture and an ongoing problem, heroin was not tolerated on the estate, according to the estate police officer:

*We have a number of people who supply cannabis in quite considerable quantities to people on the estate. These people are the armed robbers. These people do not tolerate people supplying heroin. Do you know why? They're protecting their own market. They are the estate mafia, and they will go round and they will physically impose their will. However, it is available*

– *off the estate. And there is a pool of users on the estate.* (Alan, police officer, W/AM19)

Several workers agreed that drugs were *'a major problem. There's quite a few people on this estate are making big livings from dealing'* (W/LG4/5). Education and information about drugs was available on the estate, but drug problems were entrenched, complex and difficult to resolve.

#### 5.3.3.4.4 Relationships

Within the community, family ties were strong: there were relationships among families and even within families, and several generations lived in close proximity. This reinforced the insularity of the estate. Inter-marriage between cousins was not unusual, and among the research participants were a couple who were half brother and sister.

There were many single parents, particularly women, although there were also two single fathers in the community centre. Teenage pregnancy was not seen as a problem since extended families supported pregnant teenagers. Family was important and people felt a duty to help family. Jim had moved away from the estate but moved back to help out his mother (who actually had her sister and mother on the estate): *'My mam was ill, she was a little bit poorly, so I wanted to be through here. My mam's got nobody through here, so I felt it was my obligation to come through'* (LJ4). There were strong ties within families and friends on the estate.

#### 5.3.3.4.5 Turbulent emotions

*There's a lot of conflict among residents. They're all very much aware of what other do and what others have. There's a lot of back-biting and tittle-tattling among residents.* (Audrey, resident, AU2.)

Stressful lives brought about regular arguments in the community centre and there was often an air of tension. People teased each other and did not know when to stop, and tensions escalated and rows ensued over seeming trivialities. Christmas was a particularly stressful time for people on the estate as many did not have money to buy presents or celebrate the holiday in the ways most of us are accustomed to. Many families received care packages from local charities at Christmas. Emotional help and support were crucial to

begin tackling the complex problems on the estate, many of which had an information aspect.

## 5.4 Chapter summary

- *Everyday life on the estate was difficult and stressful for many of the research participants. There was a long history of unemployment, crime and poor health.*
- *Some people had taken up learning opportunities enthusiastically, but many found it difficult to cope with the changes learning brought.*
- *There were many paradoxes: residents pointed out that complex language was a barrier to accessing information but were frustrated when officials spoke to them using simple language.*
- *Residents resented officials imposing rules but were quick to enforce their own rules, which gave them a sense of power within their individual empires.*
- *People tended to live insular lives, somewhat cut off from the outside world, and they tended to trust few people outside of their social networks.*
- *The estate was stigmatised in the area, but residents were proud to live there. The stigma reinforced the insularity of the estate, which in turn fostered a strong community spirit and a determination to help one another resolve problems.*
- *Many of the attitudes and life issues described in this section formed barriers to help and information seeking. Research participants were reluctant to leave the safety of the community to access information and help; there was a lack of trust in outside people and institutions; and low self-confidence similarly had a detrimental effect on help-seeking.*
- *Rumour and gossip also hindered communication and there were many instances of mis-information and mis-communication.*
- *Information behaviour – information needs, seeking and sources – was influenced by an insular, stressful and complex small world lifestyle. Often information was available but research participants did not access it because of cultural mores or because of the overarching need for concomitant affective support.*
- *Time, patience and trust were key factors in helping people access information and support.*

## 6 Information needs

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the everyday lifestyles of estate residents and on the culture of the estate, both of which are linked inextricably to information behaviour. The present chapter focuses on information needs arising from everyday life and incorporates the second and third objectives of the research project, which were concerned with the term *information* and with information needs. It was important to ascertain participants' understanding of the term *information* in order to begin to develop a holistic picture of information within their lives: what did *information* mean to them? The third objective was to explore information needs, in other words, the areas in which people needed help, support and information. The term *information* is discussed first of all, followed by a consideration of information needs.

### 6.2 Research participants' understanding of the term *information*

One of the interview questions explored what the term *information* meant to participants. The research participants' small world lives affected the ways they viewed the term, resulting in a socially constructed conceptualisation. It was important to discover the range of meanings the term had for the research participants in order to reveal possible gaps between their meanings and information providers' meanings. Research participants were asked,

*When you hear that word 'information', what do you think?*

Some were unable to frame a response to the question saying, for example, '*don't know*' (PS5) or '*erm ... [silence]*' (JO9) or '*I don't know really*' (AS9). Several research participants viewed *information* in purely cognitive terms; others suggested an affective dimension. This latter was an interesting finding and did not match the general picture that emerged from the findings, which showed that people on the estate often needed help and support to obtain factual information.

People offered nine perceptions associated with the word *information*, ranging from the general to the specific:

- what was happening on the estate

- learning
- a lack of knowledge or a need for knowledge
- a learning place
- information seeking
- information gathering
- information sharing
- help
- a worrying concept implying issues of confidentiality
- a 'big' word that intimidates people

Many participants suggested that information was specifically about what was happening in the local community. For some, information meant '*what's going on and who's doing what thing*' (C12) and '*generally what's on*' (DM13). One woman relied on her husband to let her know what was happening locally and suggested a similar definition: '*my [husband] used to come home and tell us everything*' (LB8). Their meaning of information was restricted to local news and gossip about what was happening on the estate. This perhaps parochial perspective reflected the insular nature of their small worlds and the strength of local social networks. For Janet likewise, information meant local news, but with the additional aspect of specific information about regeneration: '*it's what's going on ... what they're doing with the estate*' (J5). By 'they', Janet meant multi-agency regeneration workers. She then introduced a second category, which included the concept of learning. Janet suggested information also included '*courses and things like that*' (J5). John shared this opinion, perceiving information to be '*learning or somewhere you can go and learn something you didn't know*' (JY8/9). His perception contained three additional concepts: a lack of knowledge, a learning place and active information seeking.

June's perception of information also included the idea of knowledge: '*it's when you want to know things*' (JS10). It was a want for information, but which did not necessarily involve active information seeking; it was merely a wish to know something. Margaret said simply, '*help*' (DM13) but did not illuminate this further; however, hers was the only definition that alluded to 'help' – adding an affective strand to the term information. Jim described information as '*anything that you need to know*' (LJ16/17), again implying a need to know something but with no active information seeking.

mentioned. Gerry said, *'telling you things, finding out'* suggesting people giving information as well as his own active information seeking. Krissy took a similar information seeking perspective, describing information as *'something I need to know that is telling me what I need to know'* (K16). Her response referred to a lack of knowledge, to an information need and to an information response or source.

Sarah's response was specific and defined information as: *'something I need to find out. It's asking a question and getting an answer'* (SA8). If she needed to know something, she expressed that need by framing a question and expecting a resolution; for her it was active information seeking. She seemed to perceive information as facts and something to be known.

Although there was a possibility that Sharon, who worked as a volunteer receptionist in the community centre, misinterpreted the question, she defined *information* from a different perspective; she conceptualized it from her work perspective: as her helping people find things out (S18/19). Her answer was illuminating, as she introduced the idea of confidentiality of information: *'You have to be careful what sorts of information you give to different people. Some information can be very confidential, erm, like, private... You have to be very careful, especially, like, somewhere like this, cos there is a lot of confidential stuff about'* (S19). For her, information was often something personal and confidential, as well as having a more affective aspect.

This aspect was echoed in other responses alluding to the difficulties associated with the 'troublesome concept' (Wilson, 1981) of *information*. When Lillian heard the word, she thought, *'what do they want to know about me?'* (LJ27). Information was, for her, a word to fear because it was associated with confidentiality and with divulgence of personal, private information. This was a typical affective response and highlights the need for information providers to be sensitive to a heightened awareness of issues of confidentiality and privacy of information in some disadvantaged populations.

Because of these issues, some found the word intimidating and associated it with formal institutions. Jim suggested, *'information is an academic word and a lot of people can't do it'* (LJ17/18). The word itself presented a barrier, past which many could not go. This was true for Lillian, who described *information* as *'that big long word; it scares a lot of people'* (LJ16/17) ... *it frightens me; information is a big word'* (LJ27). The word was imbued with negative qualities: it was scary and intimidating, and it had bureaucratic associations. Lillian suggested that rather than use the word *information*, people should say,

*'If there's anything you need to know, we're here to help you'* (LJ17). In her example, she attached a more conventional meaning to the definition: a lack of knowledge, but she further suggested ways in which we could help her: by avoiding the big word and by being friendly and helpful.

As suggested by Shannon and Weaver (1948), Childers (1975), Nitecki (1985), Badenoch et al (1994), Orna (1999) and others, the term *information* is a difficult one and means many things to many people. For this group of research participants, this proved to be true. Their definitions were influenced by their life experiences and included both positive and negative responses as well as cognitive and affective dimensions.

### 6.3 Information needs

Twelve specific cognitive information needs categories emerged from the data, to which an additional overlying category of 'help and support' was added: this affective need was a vital thread linking other categories but in order to describe it more fully, it was useful to categorise it separately. Figure 17 presents an overview of individual participants' information and help need categories. It was useful to see in overview the issues with which people needed help or information as it highlighted important areas of need. Research participants needed help and support in responding to many information problems, particularly health, finances and relationships. Few people had transport problems but there were shops within walking distance and a bus service into the town; two participants owned cars. Not everyone had employment needs as some were near retirement age, while others could not or did not want to work. Information needs and information sources were linked inextricably, and research participants often spoke of both needs and sources in the same context. Consequently, the supporting quotes from the transcripts may at times refer to both information needs and information sources.

	Phil	Sarah	Lillian	Carol	Alex	Joan	Janet	Audrey	Lesley	Kristy	Anne	Marion	June	Eileen	Dan	Sharon	Gerry	Jim	John	Bob	Margaret
Benefits	✓																				
Consumer issues																					
Community safety																					
Employment																					
Family and relationships																					
Finances																					
Health																					
Help and support																					
Housing																					
Learning																					
News																					
Recreation																					
Transport																					

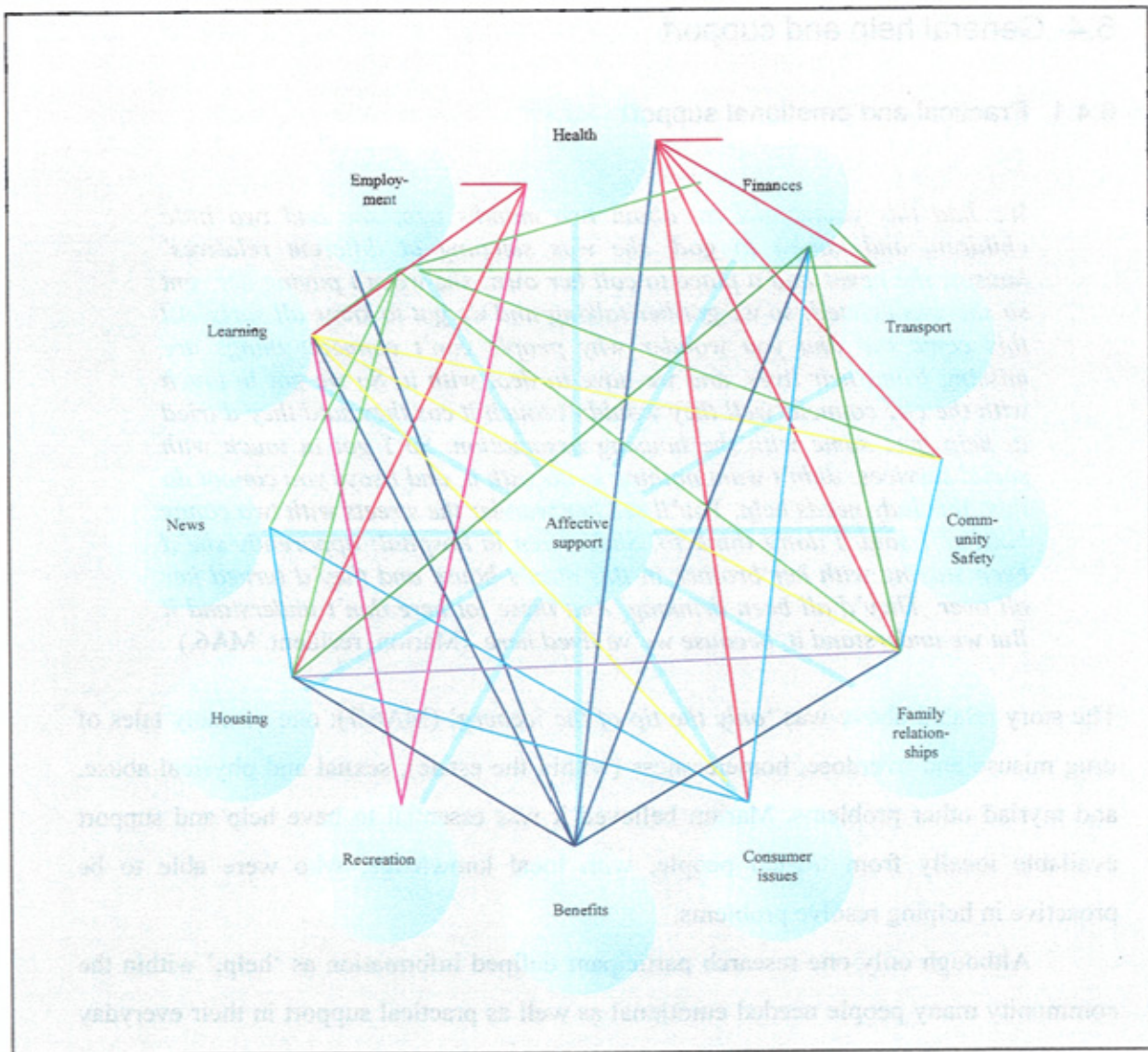
Figure 17 Information and help needs categories



Almost all categories of information needs were inter-linked, so that, for example, information needs such as employment, safety or debts might have generated health difficulties. Everyday life for people on the estate was challenging and complex; it was therefore vital to see problems or help needs holistically and within the context of everyday life. As the education welfare officer pointed out:

*We cover all issues and it isn't just kids going to school. It's other issues. Totally unrelated to kids. Parents. Single mums. Single dads. Issues about housing, harassment. These can all impact upon the way the family's functioning which can then impact on issues of doing homework, which creates issues for school.*  
(W/K2)

Figure 18 describes the links visually and demonstrates the complex relationships among various information and help needs. Lillian's efforts to sort out her broken vacuum cleaner (see p.129) illustrated this inter-linked relationship. Several discrete categories of information need, including consumer issues, finances and health (stress), combined with an overlying need for help and support. A further illustration was Joan's physical health needs: she had cancer, which impacted her employment chances (and therefore her finances) and caused emotional stress, which affected her family life.



**Figure 18 Inter-relationships among information and help needs**

The categories of information needs in the preceding figure manifest themselves in real-life situations, which are explored in more detail in the following sections.

## 6.4 General help and support

### 6.4.1 Practical and emotional support

*We had this young girl in, about two months ago, she had two little children, and honest to god, she was sleeping at different relatives' houses, she never had a place to call her own; she wasn't paying her rent so she was evicted; so we got her talking and we got to know all sorts. All this come out and you wonder why people can't connect; things are missing from their lives, and we have to deal with it. So we got in touch with the city council; well they wouldn't touch it cos they said they'd tried to help her; same with the housing association. So I got in touch with social services: didn't want nothing to do with it, and I says you cannot do this: this lady needs help. You'll see her wander the streets with two canny bairns? I said, I don't think so. She's been in hospital: apparently she'd been staying with her brother in this man's house and they'd turned her all over. They'd all been drinking. And these lot here don't understand it But we understand it, because we've lived here. (Marion, resident, MA6.)*

The story related above was 'only the tip of the iceberg' (MA6/7): one of many tales of drug misuse and overdose, homelessness (within the estate), sexual and physical abuse, and myriad other problems. Marion believed it was essential to have help and support available locally from trusted people, with local knowledge, who were able to be proactive in helping resolve problems.

Although only one research participant defined information as 'help,' within the community many people needed emotional as well as practical support in their everyday lives. Because help and information needs were complex, solutions to the issues were also complex and needed to be approached holistically. Practical problems often had emotional consequences: a benefits or housing issue might bring stress. Often residents needed someone only to listen and to offer support. Residents turned to trusted workers regularly for help and support. Joe, the community support worker, described specific problems residents had asked about him one particular morning:

*Can you help us to organise something for our group? Can you write a letter because I'm struggling: I need to tell the employment agency about it? Can you help phone somebody because I've got an issue around crime? Yeah, half a dozen enquiries. And I've had all of them today. (Joe, community support worker, W/JK6.)*

The problems highlighted included the need for 'help' to resolve them: people needed help to figure out how to do things. Participants looked to family and friends for help and support. Carol, when asked who supported her in everyday life, said, *'I think family, yeah, they help us a lot'* (C4). She also gained support through key workers and through the women's group, with whom she could *'talk about issues or problems or things that we're wanting to do'* (C10).

Some, like Sharon, felt completely alone with nobody to help her: *'I wouldn't have asked anybody. No, I don't trust anybody. Well, there's my friend, but there's not a lot she can do. I'd just have to sort it out myself ... I was like a loner'* (S4). This idea of resolving problems alone was voiced by several participants and is considered further in section 7.3.3.

#### 6.4.2 Making phone calls

Research participants needed support in making phone calls, which presented two obstacles: the cost and the process of making the call. This had implications for information seeking behaviour. For many, the bureaucratic processes involved in making a phone call were a barrier: some people were afraid of contacting formal organisations. Community workers helped residents to make the call rather than actually making the call for them:

*Sometimes I have to make the phone call for them initially. And then I'll say, well you speak. It might just be ringing the number and letting them have the telephone. (AU1) ... Quite often, if I didn't get on the phone and even make the phone call, they wouldn't do it. (Audrey, resident, AU8.)*

Debt problems often necessitated using the phone, but residents were afraid to resolve these types of problems by phone (MA5/6).

#### 6.4.3 Form filling

Understanding and completing forms was difficult for many and several residents spoke of the need to get help deciphering and completing forms; workers regularly helped residents with these issues. As many people experienced literacy difficulties, they particularly needed this practical help. The social worker described one of the problems:

*Certainly there's a hard core with forms. Every year you've got to give a statement regarding change of circumstances; if you don't fill it out, your benefit stops. But nearly every year they're going to ask whether there's a change in circumstances ... But a lot of them, they can't fill it in properly or if they did fill it in, it'd just be returned. So, yes, there's a hard core that come to me. (Patrick, social worker, W/P3.)*

Lesley, a resident, often helped people complete forms; she also suggested a solution to the problem:

*I've filled forms in for people on the estate, like benefit forms. I think there should be somebody in here or somewhere on the estate. I mean, there was one gentleman who had never filled a form in before 'cos he couldn't read and write properly, so he's lost loads of benefits. Now, there should be somebody he can come to and say: can you help me fill these forms in.*

(LB6.)

Alongside difficulties understanding and completing forms, residents had problems understanding official letters because of the complicated language involved. On several occasions, residents came into the community centre waving letters and asking for help with translation. This was frustrating for them and added to their feelings of helplessness, as Dan described, *'You always come across one of them where you've got to ask someone else what it means. You should just be able to read it and say, alright'* (DM18). Forms and letters need to be accessible by being in clear, plain English so that those with lower literacy levels can understand them. Residents needed practical help and support filling in forms and understanding official communications, but in the long-term, they need the literacy skills to be able to help themselves.

## 6.5 Benefits

Benefits were a commonly discussed help and information need. Specific benefits-entitlement problems did not emerge as a major issue of concern for participants as most people knew where to go to find that type of information (although the community centre manager disagreed: see below), and furthermore, there was help within the community centre. Problems arose for two reasons: firstly, when benefits were stopped or changed, and secondly, there was the perpetual problem of coping on benefits, although this was accepted as part of everyday life.

### 6.5.1 Benefits entitlements

Many of those on benefits had experienced entitlement problems and often sorted out those issues by turning to social and community workers for help. People were often unable to resolve these issues alone, despite being familiar with the benefits system. People felt that they needed an intermediary to help, as they felt the 'system' was against them and that direct access would be futile. Jim needed information regarding his entitlement to severe disablement pension (O69-2) and resolved the need by asking two social workers and his college tutor for help.

Gerry experienced similar difficulties sorting out his benefits and described the problems and the way he had resolved them, using a social worker as an 'info-mediator':

*They took us off the sick and they sent us up to the college for the disabled. But when I got (there), they chased us, wouldn't have us: we can't have you here with blood pressure like that. Get back to the dole. So I was bad that day, my blood pressure was right up ... . What a job I had getting back on the dole. I got on in the end with the help of a social worker.*  
(GY8)

Anne needed to know about maternity benefits and asked her midwife: '*she explained and she give us the leaflet and things like that*' (AS 2/3). She sought advice directly at source, but the information she sought was straightforward factual information, and she did not need support to do this.

The community centre manager believed that residents did not always have enough information about benefits entitlement. She gave the following example:

*Another piece of very important information on the estate at the very moment is extra money for lone parents: if they are participating in any training they can get an extra £15 a week and they can get their training paid for. That is important. They need to know that.* (Lorna, community centre manager, W/LW17.)

She implied that the information was available but that people did not necessarily have it. This could have been because the information was not distributed widely or because residents did not ask; whatever the reason, an important piece of information did not get through to everyone.

### 6.5.2 Coping on benefits

Residents needed help and information about how to cope on benefits, and this was both a practical and an affective help need. One of the residents who volunteered in the crèche stated that young mothers needed help and support in the form of a listening ear:

*If their money's been stopped off the 'nash' what they really want is for somebody to listen to them and be supportive. I mean money issues: I know there's nothing we can do, but they know that we'll listen to them.*  
(Krissy, resident, K9.)

Her words revealed that the need for a listening ear was vitally important and an important point for information providers to note.

Two residents revealed that benefits overpayment had caused problems, as it had been difficult to repay, and they had needed help knowing how to cope. Lillian had been on invalidity benefits for over 30 years and could not use the bath, since she was unable to get in or out of it. She needed a walk-in shower and although she was entitled to a grant towards costs, she could not afford the remainder (O42-2). Lillian needed practical support to help her maintain hygiene, but she did not appear to see this as a problem for which she could get help. For her, the facts were simple, she was not mobile enough to use the bath or shower, she could not afford to change it and consequently she dealt with the problem as best she could.

Lillian's behaviour appeared to be typical for participants: they were able to find information and help up to a certain point, after which they stopped, possibly because they did not realise that more help and information was available (they had reached the limits of their knowledge), or because they accepted the information they had already been given as comprehensive, or because they lacked the energy to do anymore.

## 6.6 Community safety

During an information day, The Main Event (TME), on the estate, residents were asked to discuss areas about which they had most concerns. One of these areas was community safety. Specific worries included joy-riding, drugs, threats by gangs of lads, theft, fire-starting, vandalism and fear of reprisals. Several residents mentioned that they had tried to resolve issues over the years, but they felt that their concerns had been ignored and that nothing had changed. People needed to know how to obtain constructive help to begin to

eradicate these problems, but they were hampered by an estate culture of not spilling the beans about their fellow residents. These were cognitive needs with an underlying affective dimension.

#### 6.6.1 Petty crime

Despite falling crime figures on the estate, many residents continued to have worries about issues such as vandalism, joy-riding, theft and drugs (TME4/5) but felt they could not do anything about it because of fear of reprisals. Dan revealed that:

*Dan: With most issues you cannot go to the police. You can't report it to the council.*

Researcher: Why is that then?

*Dan: Because there's retaliation. You can't go out your door or they'll torment the life out of your kids. If people saw you talking about crime issues, straight away they think you're grassing. So that wouldn't help. So there's no one really. Nine times out of 10, you've just got to ignore it and get on with your life. You can't really talk to people in the centre. You cannot trust them. (DM4/5)*

It was a 'Catch 22' situation, as the police could not prosecute criminals without evidence, but residents felt unable to offer evidence. The estate police officer was similarly frustrated by his powerlessness on the estate, as he knew the issues with which residents needed help, but the barrier remained of people not wanting to be seen as a 'grass.'

During the information day, comments included, '*why hasn't anything been done about joy-riding?*'; '*it's time something was done about car-crime*'; '*people with a prison record are still being housed on the estate*' and '*people feel threatened and frightened*' (TME4/5). Residents felt that their help and information needs were largely ignored, and they were frustrated. Information and communication between the estate residents and the police was difficult and unproductive, and there was a tendency for residents not to recognise that by giving information to the police, they could be part of the solution.

#### 6.6.2 Children's safety

Directly related to concerns about general community safety were residents' main safety concerns, which were about their young children, '*that they're well looked after and ...*



*safe at home*' (C6). Children playing on the roads were in danger from joy-riders. The lighting on the estate was inadequate and contributed towards the unsafe environment. One parent felt powerless to resolve his concerns for three principal reasons: he believed anyone seen talking to the police invited retaliation from the estate, the council did not take his complaints seriously and he did not trust anyone in the community centre to help resolve the situation. Again this was a problem of inadequate information and communication. People often felt they had nowhere to turn, as they had exhausted the limits of their knowledge.

#### 6.6.3 CCTV cameras

Another community safety concern was the effectiveness of the CCTV cameras. Although people tended to feel that the estate was safer than previously and that there were fewer burglaries, some, including Gerry, felt that CCTV cameras were ineffective:

*As for these cameras, I don't know if they're doing any good. Are they doing the job? I mean the motor bikes are still flying about. You know there's no way you can stamp that out is there? You'll always get that. Young bits of lads at night. Are they doing their job? Is there anybody at the other end of it? I think they're just there for show. (GY6)*

To help him feel safer on the estate, Gerry needed reassurance that the cameras worked.

#### 6.6.4 Domestic violence

Violence against women on the estate was *'like a national pastime. Women get beaten up. It's like a hobby'* (W/AM25), according to the local police officer, who believed that communication skills and education would help to stop the pattern of domestic violence. He told of one young woman:

*Her partner put her in hospital. And then six weeks later she married him. Absolutely crackers! It's education. The bottom line is education. If you educate these people, then they will have a chance. Until they are educated or until they accept that they want to be educated ... see this is the trouble, I'm saying educate them, they don't want to be, you know. (Alan, police officer, W/AM25.)*

Information and education were key ingredients needed to break the pattern, but the situation was difficult, as residents did not necessarily want to change the status quo,

and many women accepted violence in their relationships as part of the culture. This was beginning to change as the women's refuge kept women on the estate informed about their rights and their options.

#### 6.6.5 Drugs

Drugs were part of the estate culture and because of their existing knowledge of and familiarity with drugs, youngsters needed increasingly sophisticated information:

*When we do drug education sessions, the information we've got is far more than what people their age should have. I mean we had one girl, she's 15 now, but when she was 11 she knew everything. Cos we had all the cards out and the others were saying, oh what's this and she knew everything. Her dad was a big dealer on the estate. So obviously she knew all the paraphernalia from home. Two of her brothers are addicted. (Liz, youth worker, W/LG5.)*

Residents were worried about the prevalence of drugs and the associated threats to their children, and they needed help and support to tackle the associated problems. In common with other research participants, Krissy had information and help needs about drug issues but did not necessarily take her concerns any further:

*... drugs is getting bad again on the estate. I worry about young kids for drugs and things like that. Things are changing for the worse, especially with the drugs thing. Yeah ... I'm really worried about drugs. (K8, K11)*

Community safety was an area of concern for many of the research participants and thus an area about which they needed information, help and support. However, this was a difficult issue to overcome, since with problems such as drugs, domestic violence and petty crime, residents needed to resist the dominant local culture of keeping problems within the estate or within the family, of not being seen as a 'grass' and of working against the authorities.

#### 6.7 Consumer issues

Research participants needed consumer information about a variety of topics, ranging from the cheapest places to buy Christmas gifts and everyday household items, to more serious problems involving consumer rights.

### 6.7.1 Best prices

Finding the best prices for consumer goods was important for people to be able to manage their finances, and reading the shopping catalogues was an interest. Most of their questions in this category were orientation types of questions: straightforward enquiries about where to find the cheapest prices. Anne, who was pregnant, needed to know where to buy second-hand items for her baby, as well as where the cheapest prices were generally for baby things. She needed information about:

*Prams, pushchairs, things like that. I've been going on the Internet and people round the estate and that. I ask people. They'll tell us, oh such-and-such has got that for sale. Like looking for the cheapest place as well. (AS 3/4)*

Residents actively sought this type of information: one resident went into town every Tuesday morning and brought back advertising flyers from the local stores. These were a source of interesting information and everyone enjoyed looking at the special offers (O71-1). Some residents seemed to know where to get good deals (O85-1) and would pass the details of bargains on to others.

A lack of information about consumer rights led to stressful and problematic situations.

### 6.7.2 Consumer problems

Several residents had problems with consumer purchases and with utilities bills, which had both affective and cognitive aspects. People regularly bought consumer goods through catalogues, as the terms of payment suited the research participants' lifestyles; however, the high rates of credit frequently led to debt problems. People needed factual information about where to go, who to talk to and what their rights were, but at the same time, they needed affective support to help them through the stress of the situation.

Lillian had bought a vacuum cleaner and had paid for a five-year warranty (O88-3). After numerous problems with the cleaner, she exchanged it for another model, but was told the existing warranty was invalid. She used her Christmas savings to buy another warranty. I asked if she had contacted the CAB – Lillian said she just wanted to forget about it as it was all too stressful (O82-2). Lillian needed practical help as she did

not have a clear idea of her rights as a consumer, but she also needed affective help since she had neither the energy nor the confidence to pursue the matter on her own.

Not all participants needed affective support to resolve consumer issues. John had concerns about his electricity bill:

*I had problems with NPower coming round, sign this Mr Y, if you don't want us to change over. So I can't understand anything, but I must have signed something and I've had to go down to the CAB to get it sorted. They said I signed (to change over the power). I keep paying British Gas cos I've got a British gas card for my gas. And I was told not to use it; we'll send you a card out. So I was waiting and waiting and I never got the card. So I says, bugger this, I'm going to use my British Gas card, keep putting money on that so I can still have my gas on. I never signed nothing for NPower: they said I owe NPower £700 and I'll have to get it off British Gas. But the thing is I never received a bill or anything off NPower. It's a mess. They said, you owe £700 odd, if we don't receive it within such-and-such a time, we'll send in the bailiffs. (JY2/3)*

John needed information to help him tackle this consumer dilemma and, having had no luck with the utility companies, he decided to approach the CAB, which he said helped, although not to his entire satisfaction (JY2/3). John had the self-confidence and knowledge to be able to begin the process of resolving his need.

Information problems of this type – confusions over consumer issues, possible exploitation by consumer companies and communication difficulties – were common among research participants whose self-confidence was often low, whose communication skills were poor, whose information about consumer rights was inadequate and whose past experience dealing with 'officials' was difficult and daunting.

## 6.8 Employment and preparing for employment

Employment information needs were mainly cognitive: people needed straightforward information about where and how to find jobs. However, for some people job searching and interviews were daunting tasks and they needed affective help and support. Several research participants relied on the part-time employment advisor for support as well as for factual information.

### 6.8.1 Preparing for employment

Most residents of employment age were or had been involved in job training and most were aware that information was available on the estate through the employment advisor. One resident, Krissy, wanted to work as a child-minder and knew her training needs and her potential to secure work; she was self-confident, and had taken an NVQ in childcare:

*I think I'd like to go more into child-minding, which I probably would have to do some further (training) to do. But child-minding on this estate, well, everybody needs a child-minder, but most people need a qualified one to get the money to pay for the child-minder. (K3)*

Employment, along with learning, was crucial for the community to develop and grow. But, as the social worker explained, the local population tended to be under-qualified for the job market and lacked in confidence to move forward:

*It's difficult. You're not talking about people who have been to university, learned a new game. You work (and) your confidence and your intellect develops. They're expecting somebody to do that who has probably failed in education. (W/P6)*

There was a paradox: people were aware of the job training opportunities available to them and they knew where to find the information, but they did not necessarily avail themselves of that information and help, owing to cultural strictures. People needed support to help them to cope in transition to an unfamiliar and sometimes scary outside world. In order to increase skills for employment, learning and training were crucial, not only for specific job skills, but also for confidence building.

Phil wanted to find out about sign-language training as he had aspirations to teach and he knew how to go about that: he asked '*the lady who signs to Michael who works here in the kitchen who's deaf; she rang up and got the information for us*' (PS2). He recognised his needs, articulated them and received the help he wanted, through an intermediary.

Generally, research participants recognised their help and information needs regarding job skills training and knew who would help them, but they often needed help and support in order to follow through and achieve their aims.

### 6.8.2 Employment information

Finding employment information was important for those research participants who were actively seeking employment. Within this category, it was difficult to separate needs from

sources, as the need was a simply stated orientation need: *I need to find out about a job*; however, resolving the need was complicated and involved affective support as well as straightforward information.

It was common practice for people to use contacts on the estate, specifically workers (often Karla, *'the jobs lady'*) or family and friends, to help them find employment. Word of mouth was *'the best way'* (BB2) to find out about jobs, because *'you can find out all the little things: who you're going to talk to, what the job's like, where you go; if you've got the inside information'* (BB2). Phil's main concern was *'employment'* (PS3/4); he had lost his job the previous year because of transport difficulties (PS3/4), and he relied on Karla to help him find job information (PS4). He revealed that he would not find job information through his network of family and friends on the estate (this accords with Granovetter's (1973, 1983) assertion that strong ties inhibit employment seeking), although friends off the estate might pass on job information. Phil did not use the benefits office to find out about jobs, although he said he might use the *'job search day on a Tuesday'* (PS5) at the college he was attending.

## 6.9 Family relationships

Issues concerning family life and relationships were important to estate residents. Topics of concern included parenting, bullying, children's safety and caring for family members. Residents did not articulate all problem areas themselves: workers revealed concerns and the researcher noted problematic issues from observation.

### 6.9.1 Child welfare

All parents had concerns for their children. Some were worried about their youngsters' safety, some needed to know how to go about improving activities locally for young people, others wanted to know how to improve their children's behaviour, and still others had concerns about bullying and homework. Childcare was not mentioned as a specific problem (K8).

Several parents had concerns about their children's safety (see also section on crime and safety). Parents were worried about problems relating to drugs, joy-riding, road safety, gangs, broken glass and other dangerous rubbish. As with other help and information issues, expressing help and information needs in relation to child welfare was

straightforward; however, resolving them was difficult as people did not know what to do.

Related to child safety were concerns about the lack of activities for young people. Residents felt that if their children had more to do, there would be fewer child safety issues. Dan was keen to get a safe playground for the children, but he did not seem to know how to make it reality (DM10). There was a youth club, but it was poorly attended and the youth worker felt that more needed to be done for young people:

*The youth clubs are not working. We get 10 or 11 in. That's fine for those people but for all that time and money; so I'm going to do a bit more outreach work and find out what young people really want. Rather than just opening the doors and ... there must be something. (W/LG/15)*

Parenting was another issue about which people needed help and information. One of parents' main concerns was disciplining children; many expressed frustration over their inability to control their children but did not always know what to do about it. Sarah's daughter became increasingly difficult, and although Sarah had turned to various channels for help, including the police and social workers, she did not get the help and support she needed, and Sarah was finding the situation stressful (O91-2):

*What shall I do about [my daughter]? Her and Emily went over to Marie's last night and threw eggs at her windows. I just don't know how to control her. I told Marie that she ought to call the police. Mind you, she won't listen to him [police officer]. She was caught shoplifting the other week, and the police came round and talked to her and after he'd gone, [my daughter] said – does he think he can frighten me? (O80-2)*

Questions about raising children were common: 'how do you deal with cheeky kids?' or 'how do you encourage them to eat properly?' or 'how do you protect your kids?' (O51-3). Parenting classes were available in the community centre, and two residents attended. The low number was attributed to cultural mores: 'If you come to parenting classes then there is an implication that you're NOT a good parent' (SA7), and people were unwilling to 'admit they had problems with parenting' (K10).

A further child welfare problem was bullying. Again research participants recognised a need for help or information but did not necessarily know the next step to take as they had reached the limits of their knowledge. Audrey was an example of this: her 14-year old son 'was beaten unconscious and left on the street' (AU2), and also had drugs put into his cola rendering him unconscious (AU2). Audrey believed that 'the police are too intimidated by certain residents to do anything about it. I know the car that

*comes onto the estate bringing drugs, and I've told the police, but nothing happens'* (AU2). Audrey had identified a help need and had gone to what she saw as the obvious help source, the police; however, the situation was not resolved, and Audrey had no idea what to do next.

Sharon had moved away from the estate because of bullying, not only towards her children, but also towards herself. One particular family had intimidated them; she explained:

*You'd only have to say 'boo' to them and that'd be it; your windows would go through. Eggs thrown at my windows I've had many a time. And the kids used to go out to play: the little one got rived off his bike and dragged up the street by a gang of 13-16 year olds ... his head was nearly off the ground. (S3)*

Sharon and her children were happier after they moved off the estate (S21/22). She recognised a help problem and resolved it by removing herself from the problem situation, not altogether the most desirable scenario, but certainly best for her.

## 6.9.2 Adult relationships

Information and help needs regarding adult relationships tended to be about abusive relationships and caring for ill relatives.

### 6.9.2.1 Abusive relationships

Abusive relationships were a problem on the estate according to the police officer (W/AM25). (This section also links with 'crime and safety'.) Several women spoke about their past experiences with abusive partners and the ways those experiences had affected their current lives. One man spoke about abuse: a gang of youths had tried to set him on fire. Only woman one spoke of present abuse problems in her marriage: Eileen, whose husband was mentally abusive to her. Eileen felt she could not leave her husband as she had nowhere to go and no income. She needed information about getting help with her marital problems, but I doubted whether she would seek help: abuse was part of the culture and she did not have the energy to help herself. Three women had moved onto the estate via the refuge. Sarah was one of these and she had found information about how to escape her abusive husband from the police, who directed her to the refuge (SA1).



Helen had also sought information from the police. Although the local refuge supplied information to women through a support worker, women needed to have more direct and locally available information about their options in abusive relationships, and they needed support to help them cope.

#### 6.9.2.2 *Caring responsibilities*

Several people had caring responsibilities for family members, and accepted this as the status quo: it was simply what you did if your family needed you. Help needs were expressed not as help needs per se, but more as a statement of *I don't know what to do about 'x'*. People often needed support and not factual information. Eileen had to care for her husband, who had suffered a stroke that had left him deaf and with epilepsy, and she had no one to support her. Eileen also looked after her grandchildren, and had a grandson who lived with her. Jim moved back onto the estate to help look after his mother (LJ4). It was common in such a close-knit community for grandparents to look after their grandchildren; although no help or information needs were mentioned in association with this, people sometimes needed emotional support and a listening ear. Gerry had moved onto the estate 12 years previously to help his son look after his baby daughter; Gerry worried about his grand-daughter as she was often in trouble at school, and her behaviour at home was difficult.

### 6.10 Financial issues

Information and help needs stemming from financial issues tended to be both pragmatic and emotional. Money was in short supply, even for those who were working, as people tended to earn minimum wage, which led to debts and stress. In spite of the lack of money, some residents saved regularly. Financial information needs were connected with debt-related problems and with savings, one presumably an attempt to ward off the other.

#### 6.10.1 Savings and banking

Bank accounts were uncommon among the research participants; Bob was the only one with a bank account. He needed to find out about buying his council house, and was in the process of researching the procedure and negotiating a bank loan. The process did not

intimidate Bob, although his wife was worried about buying the house and scared of using the bank's facilities:

*The wife's undecided. We've fallen out over it. We haven't spoken for three days. I know it's a big step for her. She's scared of getting money out of the hole in the wall. (BB4)*

Bob knew what he needed to find out and he knew how to go about it.

Because many residents did not trust banks or other financial institutions such as credit unions, but still wanted to save money, they used the weekly savings club organised by the estate's community support worker, who remarked, '*residents like the informality of the savings club and the fact that it's in their territory*' (O15-2). He explained to residents that they could have interest on their savings through a bank or credit union, but they preferred to bank with him as they knew him and they trusted him with their money. Gerry, however, would rather have borrowed money from the credit union than from loan sharks. In common with many on the estate, Gerry owed money to loan sharks, whom he found unscrupulous and demanding:

*I had a letter this week saying I owe them £60, and because I missed one payment they want the whole lot back in one sum. I'm sick of them and I don't remember missing a payment. (O92-1)*

There was a definite need for advice and information on managing, saving and borrowing money, along with the support needed to overcome fear of institutionalised banking.

#### 6.10.2 Debt

Debt was a major problem for most research participants, who needed advice, support and information to resolve the associated issues. For some people, owning up to and seeking help for debt problems was an enormous step. Debt was a fact of everyday life, and lack of money and the ensuing problems were the norm. Debt was a way of coping, as Gerry remarked:

*I still get myself into debt with the debt collector. Well, it's the only way you can cope you know. If you want something for the bairn for Christmas, you know. I can't think of any way out of it. Once you're in it, you're there. (GY7)*

Christmas was a particularly difficult time financially and emotionally for residents and the worst time for debt:

*Some people spend huge amounts buying stuff like computers and mobile phones for their kids, and then they get into debt (AU3). Many people have been persuaded to buy things like big TVs that are pay-as-you-go, which sounds good, but then they run out of money and end up breaking the box off the TV to get the money out. (AU2)*

Lesley needed help sorting out her debt problems and visited the CAB, where she discovered that she could get help through the legal system by obtaining an 'administration order'. Lesley subsequently passed this information on to her friends who had also been experiencing debt problems. She believed that many people simply did not know they could get help with debt: *'there's a lot of people who don't know that they can get help with debt problems'* (LB10/11).

Adding to the practicalities of resolving debt problems was the health toll of stress. Helen suffered stress because of her debts: she had to pay £20 a month poll tax, which she could not afford (O56-2). Helen, who had also used the CAB to help her, described how she had managed to resolve the issue:

*It was really getting me down and I decided to ask one of my friends who also had money problems. My friend told me to go to the CAB. They got the payment reduced to £1 a week, which I could manage. (O56-2)*

She found a resolution through asking a friend; she apparently did not know the steps to take to resolve it on her own. This type of information need was an urgent one, particularly because of the associated health problems.

## 6.11 Health

Health information was another important information and help need on the estate (O28-3). The community health nurse, who had been funded for three years through SRB but no longer worked on the estate, had been a trusted person with whom residents would discuss their health problems. They did not have to leave their comfort zones because she visited them in their homes. Whenever she needed to communicate information, she would go to people and talk to them, as she found residents did not respond to flyers or

notices (O28-3). Research participants' stressful lives generated both physical and mental health issues.

#### 6.11.1 Mental and emotional health

Although mental health problems were common, few residents mentioned them as such: people talked in terms of *stress* and *nerves*, and related tales of difficulties in their lives. However, at the Health Day and at the Information Day held in the centre, residents did discuss the issue. Jim, however, was open about his mental health problems, which arose after he was held at gunpoint during his involvement with drugs. For Jim, it was difficult to resolve problems because of his invisible health problem, and he was frustrated by the lack of understanding on the part of officials: '*they don't understand*' (LJ22/23) ... '*when it's mentally, it's totally different*' (LJ23/24).

Many found day-to-day life stressful. Eileen had many emotional issues to deal with and she needed professional help but was unable to get it. Sharon, on the other hand, had recognised and sought help for her mental health problems. She attempted suicide and credited the Samaritans with helping her survive the experience:

*I had nobody to turn to and I was having a complete mental breakdown and the only person I could talk to was a complete stranger and I was talking to him over the phone as I was taking an overdose. It was them that kept me going even though I was doping myself up with tablets. They kept asking me if I was still with them; I was trying to talk ... if I had to, I'd ring them up again. If I had to. Last resort, very last resort. (S16)*

Sharon was unusual among research participants in that she knew the next step in this situation and sought help to resolve her problem. Unfortunately, she had been unable to resolve it until it was a mortal crisis. Sharon felt very much alone and turning to the Samaritans saved her life.

#### 6.11.2 Physical health

Alongside mental and emotional health information needs, physical health problems were also common. Conversation in the centre often revolved around health issues, and physical health problems were seen as normal. People used health professionals readily if they were ill, but lacked an understanding of and ability to cope with illness.

Gerry was a typical example: he had several health problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure, psoriasis and an unspecified prostate problem. He often forgot doctors' or hospital appointments: *'I always forget when they are, and as they are sometimes six months away, I can't remember'* (O92-2). I suggested he could keep a diary, but he said he would forget to look at it. Relating to his high blood pressure and diabetes, Gerry did not understand what foods he could and could not eat. He believed, for example, that he could eat regular cheese but not cottage cheese. Gerry needed unambiguous advice about his diet and his health concerns, and he needed a reminder about his appointments.

Carol had concerns about how to support her father, who was in hospital recovering from a stroke. Carol visited him daily and explained:

*I want to know, like, how to cope with somebody who's had a stroke and afterwards. So I know exactly how to understand and that, my dad, when he gets out. I just wanted to find out a bit more information. I mean, if I could use the Internet, I could probably find out a lot ... . (C15)*

Carol recognised her need for specific health-related information, but she was unsure how to obtain it. She recognised the Internet as a source of valuable information, but she did not know how to use it. In common with other information needs areas, participants recognised the problems but did not always know the next steps to take.

### 6.11.3 The health information days

Two information events related to health were held in the community centre. A health information day was held to provide access to physical and mental health information. There was information in paper format about various aspects of health: blood pressure, diabetes, reflexology, relaxation, fitness, health eating, sexual health and oral hygiene. Health workers were also available to help. A healthy buffet was provided. I spoke to several residents who had their blood pressure checked that day and had high blood pressure (O35-2). Some younger residents, like Janice, who was 20, also had high blood pressure.

Participants were looking for various types of health information: Sarah sought information on diabetes as her partner's father had the disease, and she wanted to learn more about it (O36-1). She also wanted information about bowel cancer, as two members of her family had the disease and she was worried it was hereditary (O36-1).

At a second information day on the estate, The Main Event (TME) (see Appendix F), residents raised concerns about three main areas in which they needed health information and support: smoking, diet and depression. In the report, the following were noted:

*It was pointed out that the Online Centre had the Internet providing unlimited access to information, including health information. Some residents did not know this and many others felt that the Internet was intimidating for people to use. Nobody in the workshop had used the Internet for health information. It was also pointed out that there was an 'Introduction to the Internet' course available in the Online Centre. Many residents said they wanted to stop smoking but needed help and support. Smoking and diet were linked – some residents were afraid of putting on weight if they stopped smoking. More support and information was needed locally. Depression and anxiety were invisible but important issues in the community. Some residents said they found it hard to talk about and would have liked confidential access to local support. Concerns were also expressed about the importance of access to free support. (TME4)*

Again the same pattern emerged: residents recognised aspects of their lives about which they need help, information and support, but they did not always know how to go about getting the help or whether help was a possibility. There was an acceptance of the status quo and many lacked the energy or the self-confidence to seek a resolution.

## 6.12 Housing

Residents expressed information needs about various aspects of housing: repairs, damp, overcrowding and rent. Research participants lived in rented housing association or council houses; however, Bob was in the process of buying his council house. Housing needs were also linked with financial and with health needs.

### 6.12.1 Repairs

The state of their homes was another common topic of conversation in the centre. Most of the housing was older and in need of repair. Regeneration money had paid to upgrade housing on the estate, but participants indicated that it was inadequate as the existing structures were unsound. Dan and Margaret had recently moved house within the estate and needed to get things fixed in their new home. The council workers came to fix the burglar alarm and told Dan that the alarm had been installed five years previously, but

had never been connected as the houses were supposed to have been demolished (O83-2). Their housing was inadequate and repairs simply patched up existing poor work (O83-2). Sarah described conditions in her house:

*My house is desperate. Every time I try and decorate and fill up the holes, the plaster starts crumbling somewhere else. It should be pulled down. The council won't do anything. When Janet lived next door, she had wood worm and it must be in mine too but I'm not looking too close. I'll deal with it when I fall through the floor. (O51-3)*

Although she found conditions in her house deplorable, Sarah felt helpless in resolving the situation and felt that the council would not be able to help. Yet again, people recognised a need for help, support and information, but felt powerless to do anything about it.

#### 6.12.2 Damp

Damp was a common problem for people in poorly built housing. It was a condition people had come to expect and about which they again felt powerless to do anything. Sarah's son had rented a flat on the bottom estate; Sarah said, '*it's not very nice: it's damp and really dirty*' (O85-2), but this was again accepted as the status quo. Beatrice, a woman in her 70s, had moved out of her house into a bungalow to allow renovations to take place; however, she felt she could not cope with the upset of moving again and decided to stay in the bungalow. Since moving to the bungalow, Beatrice had become ill because of the damp condition of the house (O88-2).

#### 6.12.3 Overcrowding

Only one family discussed overcrowding: Dan and Margaret, who lived with their five children in a three-bedroom house, with four boys sharing one room. The boys had broken their bunk beds, and two of the boys shared a single bed. Margaret was trying to save up for new beds through the women's group savings club, but she said she really needed to use the money for Christmas (O83-3). Margaret and Dan were frustrated by their living conditions, but felt unable to improve them.

#### 6.12.4 Rent and rates

In housing association properties, tenants paid rent and water rates separately; previously, when the properties had been council-owned, the rent had included water rates. Some residents found this change difficult to manage. Out of her £97 a week widow's allowance, June had to pay £30 rent plus water rates. She found it difficult to make ends meet and had concerns about a rent rise (O12-2): she had been shocked when a letter arrived in which it said her rent was to increase. June was very anxious about it, as she could not afford to pay more than she was already paying.

Having to pay water rates separately, Gerry similarly found it difficult to budget (O43-3). As he was living in his son's house as a lodger, Gerry had to pay £15 a week rent to the housing association in addition to the rent his son paid, which he thought unfair. The costs of rent caused additional stress problems for some people.

#### 6.13 Learning

Although there was generally an estate culture of being anti-school and anti-formal education, many people were in fact keen to learn about a variety of things, but in non-traditional ways. The local history class within the centre was an outstanding example of a positive learning experience. The computer classes held in the centre, however, were generally unsuccessful, as were the parenting classes. Residents were interested in learning based on their terms and focused around their interests. Among the learning information needs of residents were basic skills needs, school and homework needs and general learning needs.

##### 6.13.1 Basic skills needs

Many research participants had poor basic skills and needed help and support to improve the situation. Some were illiterate, while others wanted to improve their skills. A basic skills instructor visited the centre twice a week. Alex, who was illiterate, did not want anyone to know he was getting help, and initially he would not join the skills group. He referred to his illiteracy as '*my disability*' or he would say, '*you know why I can't do x,y,z*'. However, he gained in confidence during one-on-one sessions and eventually joined the group. The instructor pointed out the effects on Alex:



*Alex's skills have not massively increased but his confidence has increased. His basic skills, it's going to be a long, slow process. To be honest I don't know whether we'll ever get there, you know. But he's further ahead in his confidence than he ever was before. (W/SJ4)*

Alex's being able to write his name was a real success story, as many avenues opened up for him through his new confidence, but there were two lessons to be learned: the need to be sympathetic to individual learning preferences and the need for trust and time.

Others needed to be persuaded to improve their literacy skills. Combining two interests, local history and walking, within the basic skills class brought positive results, and as the instructor described, *'It's basic skills by stealth!'* (W/SJ2). She believed that people were not necessarily interested in improving their skill levels per se, but that they were interested in finding out things. However, it was difficult for them to find information, as the process of finding out was a barrier:

*... because it isn't easy for people to do the kind of research that people who have been educated take for granted: looking up in a book, looking up in the index, looking up in contents, reading the Internet, negotiating their way through the Internet. And people who've not had that formal educational background, that's quite new to them. I find they don't have the ability to skim through and discard information, like an established reader does, or a person who's been through school and had more formal education. (W/SJ3)*

#### 6.13.2 Issues associated with children's schooling

Several residents had concerns about aspects of their children's schooling: behaviour, homework and truanting. Margaret was particularly concerned about her second son, but did not know how to help him:

*He's got ADHD and he can't read or write properly and he hasn't got any friends at school. He did have one friend, but then this year, he was kept back, but his friend moved up, and now he hasn't got nobody. He doesn't like the teacher and I don't think the teacher likes him 'cos he's disruptive. (DM1/2)*

Again the same patterns emerged: a help need was recognised but the person did not know how to resolve it, did not see it as an information problem and accepted the issue as the way life was.

Children's' homework was a concern for some parents. John had concerns about being able to help his daughter as she grew older:

*At the moment she's doing stuff what I can do, you know, but when it comes to when she's turning 14 and I'm looking at 'if  $a=30$ ' algebra type stuff, then I'll be knackered, so where do we go from here? (JY5/6)*

Other parents mentioned children's homework as an information need; Dan's son needed 'leaflets on healthy eating' (DM3) to complete a homework project, which they were able to find at the doctor's office.

The education welfare officer told of truanting problems and exclusions from school. He stated that some parents condoned school absence:

*Condoned absence is major. The big issue with the children is that they know they can present challenging behaviour, argue and be thrown out of the house: get away, I've had enough of you. They'll come back in an hour's time and have a lovely meal, a curry, and they'll never have to address, there's no consequences for what they've done, and that's in the vast majority of families. It's an attitude of living for them. They only see it for that afternoon. It's living for the day. (W/K12)*

He suggested that the parents' restricted worldview, 'living for the day', meant that there were no consequences for inappropriate behaviour; parenting skills were lacking and little value was placed on the long-term benefits of learning.

### 6.13.3 General learning needs

(See also Section 6.8 on employment information needs) There was no shortage of opportunities for training and learning in the community centre: computers, health and safety, parenting, arts and crafts, Indian head massage, light exercise, local history and basic skills, and more. However, because of entrenched negative attitudes towards learning, the more formalised learning opportunities, such as computer classes, tended to be poorly attended, whereas informal learning or learning 'by stealth' was more popular. Learning linked directly with people's interests or concerns was successful. The basic skills instructor believed:

*I think they're not keen on formal learning. It comes back to the stealth thing again: they learn as they go along in a subject area they're already interested in and build on what they're interested in, but as for setting up a formal course on anything really, I don't think ... they don't seem to be*

*able to make that commitment. And they don't see it as something that's for them. Learning is to do with school. They have bad memories of school. It's not for me. I don't like school, and they pass that on to their children and it just becomes handed on down the line. And the key is to break that cycle. (W/SJ9)*

Because of past negative experiences, of not wanting to seem different or better, of low self-esteem and low ambition, many people were reluctant to engage with formal or even informal learning. However, learning by stealth and linking with people's interests was extremely successful.

## 6.14 News

Residents were interested in finding out about the news, particularly the local news in the area and, more specifically, on the estate. People wanted to know what was happening on the estate and, as reported previously, some participants defined *information* as what was happening on the estate. Information about news and gossip was generally straightforward cognitive information, and people used social networks as well as media such as the newspapers or TV and Teletext to find out things. For some people though, the news had an affective association and they did not want to hear about upsetting events.

### 6.14.1 Estate news

For many people, an important information need was to find out what was happening on the estate. Joan described the kinds of things she wanted to find out:

*... the gossip: have you seen such-and-such a stranger? Have you seen the police? Have you seen, you know what I mean? That's how you find out, if you're out chatting on a night; like Sarah's out and Margaret's out and we're out. And further along you might meet Alex and them; they're all out and you can see what's happening on the estate. You find out the gossip. (JO7)*

June also felt that it was important to know what was happening on the estate, but her definition was narrowly confined to the community centre. When asked what information she wanted, she replied:

*What's going on in the centre and where they're getting the money from for these grants to keep the building going? What groups is on? Activities going on. As far as I know, everybody's interested in that kind of information. (JS9)*

#### 6.14.2 Local news

People within the community were also keenly interested in local news. They knew what they wanted to find out about and they knew where to get the information. Joan wanted to know:

*... the local news, the northeast, mebbes the news on a night time, six o' clock. Just to see if there's anything on about X Road! (JO9)*

Access to local news via the local newspaper, which was distributed free in the wider local community, was unavailable to the people on estate, as the newspaper office refused to deliver it there. Krissy watched TV for the news:

*If I want to know what's happening, I put the news on, especially the Northeast news, I think that's the best thing. I don't actually read a paper. I read other people's but I don't get it myself. (K17)*

#### 6.14.3 National and global news

Some people said they did not want information about the national news as there were so many awful stories; Gerry said, '*you get up every morning, you're frightened to pick that newspaper up. It's getting worse, man. It's an awful life at the moment*' (GY8/9).

Similarly, Sharon indicated:

*I don't watch the news or read newspapers 'cos I find them depressing. I don't want to go back to being miserable: I've been there. I did listen to the news ... when it was the news in America with the aeroplane. I watched that. I sat and cried. I don't like depressing things; I want to be happy and lively all the time. (S18)*

So, information about news outside of the local area was not seen as essential or even desirable.

## 6.15 Recreation

With the building of the new community centre came the opportunity to take up a variety of hobbies and interests, a number of which also incorporated learning opportunities and had information aspects. Most participants had a variety of interests, including bingo, genealogy, painting, local history and collecting. John was interested in photography and in finding about his family tree, and he used the Internet within the community centre, and later the local public library, for information.

The men's and women's groups were popular with a specific clique of residents; however, precisely because of the cliques they were not popular with everyone. For the women who joined the women's group, though, it provided useful social contact and an informal place to exchange information:

*We play bingo and we have a savings where we pay a pound each fortnight. We talk about issues or problems or things that we want to do within the group. You can talk to other women about things. But a lot of them don't seem interested: they just come for the free food ... And then we've been to Scarborough a few weeks back; we had a trip out, just women and kids. (Carol, resident, C10)*

One of Dan's main pleasures was fishing: *'I love the scenery and the peace'* (DM2). He needed to know the weather forecast and information about the areas he intended to visit, and used the Internet in the centre to download maps of the fishing areas he was visiting (DM2).

### 6.15.1 Reading

Several residents mentioned that they enjoyed reading. For Sarah, reading was an important part of her life: *'my passion. I love books'* (SA5/6), and although she used to go to the library *'all the time'* where she used to live, since moving, *'generally I go into second hand shops buying books, or I just buy a cheap book'* (SA9). Gerry was also an avid reader and a former library user (he was banned for losing a book and was unable to pay the fine), and he wanted to find out if it was possible to use the library again. After the library visit (see Appendix G), his library card was reinstated and he subsequently visited the library weekly for reading material and for videos.

## 6.16 Transport

Residents did not mention transport issues as a major concern. Phil had a work-related transport problem and had lost his previous job because he lacked transport: *'I couldn't get a driver to take us to work, so they had to lay us off'* (PS3/4). He could not find work locally, and without the means of getting to work outside the local area, transport was a problem for him.

Another transport-related issue was the cost of travel, which prevented some people from accessing the town and its services. The bus fare into town was around 70p each way, which was more than some could afford. Jim believed the cost of fares prevented people from accessing information, and he wanted to see information available:

*... in the community, just close by so you didn't have far to go. There's people who can't get to (town). I mean (town)'s a mile away, you know. You've got to get a bus or taxi and they're both expensive.* (LJ15/16)

Physical difficulties also made transport complicated for some. Lillian found it difficult to get into town because of her health; when asked what she thought about using the local library for information, she answered in the abstract:

*Some of them who want to go down, mebbes it's the travelling. Mebbes they can't travel. You know 'cos they can't get. You know what I mean, because me, I can't. It's difficult for me going down there.* (LJ14)

So, transport complexities made getting to work potentially difficult and also prevented people from accessing local services because of physical or financial limitations.

## 6.17 Chapter summary

*Information needs on this estate are based on issues that people need as essential to live.* (Community centre manager, W/LW16)

- *Participants had a wide range of conceptualisations of the term 'information' ranging from gossip to learning to 'what do they want to know about me?'*
- *Information needs on the estate were based on everyday coping issues such as health, finances and housing.*

- *Most information needs were cognitive in nature with an affective dimension: participants often needed support in the form of a sympathetic and listening ear or someone to help them make connections and next steps.*
- *People often recognised issues about which they needed help, support and information, but they sometimes found it difficult to articulate those needs and did not know what steps to take to resolve them.*
- *Information and help needs were holistic, complex and inter-linked, e.g., financial problems often led to stress and health problems.*
- *There were barriers to participants' expressing information and health needs such as fear of authority, fear of reprisals, inability to articulate concerns, lack of confidence, powerlessness, lack of energy and importance of confidentiality.*
- *Trust was a vital component of help and information needs as participants felt able to express their problems in a trusting environment.*
- *There was a cultural acceptance of problems such as ill-health, abusive relationships, petty crime, debt and drugs as being normal and so information was not necessarily seen as a way to resolve problems.*

## 7 Responding to information needs

### 7.1 Introduction

Information needs, as discussed in the previous chapter, were based on everyday life issues in a variety of areas. How participants responded to those needs is the focus of the present chapter, which addresses the fifth aim of the research:

*to investigate how and where people searched for help and information.*

Research participants responded to their information needs in a variety of ways, but when actively seeking information and help, they initially tended to use their social networks on the estate before turning to alternative sources, such as the CAB or alternative methods, such as the phone. Chatman (1985) and Wilson and Walsh (1996) indicate two important characteristics of information sources: accessibility and credibility. These were key factors in this study: informants' preferences were for local information within the estate, and for the information to be from a knowledgeable, trusted person or place. Some research participants felt that they could resolve their problems themselves, and others were information intermediaries.

This chapter explores research participants' information sources and the ways in which they accessed them. Information sources were divided into three types:

- local informal social networks (friends, neighbours, family members, regeneration workers)
- local media (TV, newspapers, Internet)
- off-estate formal agencies (CAB, public library, benefits office, health professionals)

Apart from health and benefits related information, active information seeking outside the estate was undertaken usually only in crisis situations, such as for debt problems, and via info-mediaries such as regeneration workers or via more formal sources such as the CAB. Acquiring information did not necessarily involve an active search; in fact, research participants often acquired information more passively by talking to family, friends and workers on the estate. This ties in with Bates' (1989) concept of



berry picking and Erdelez's (1999) information encountering, in which information 'seeking' is more passive and opportunistic.

## 7.2 Active and passive information seeking

*For people to actively seek information there has to be a crisis or some kind of injustice. (Community worker, O90-2)*

Active information seeking occurred mainly when there was a crisis situation or when residents felt that their personal situations had been unjustly altered; for example, by a benefits underpayment or delay. Most people absorbed information from their contacts in their daily lives. Only one resident mentioned actively searching for information:

*If you sit back, you'll never get nothing. You've got to go out and look for things. It's like information. You've got to go and look for information; it doesn't just come to you. (LJ23)*

Research participants often acquired information passively. Sarah stated that her most reliable information source, the refuge, kept her informed about useful or interesting information. She waited for her contact there to pass on relevant information. The youth worker noticed that the young people she worked with did not initiate information seeking; they:

*... tend to do it [ask for information] in a less formal way. They'll do it within a conversation; they don't just come right out with it.' (W/LG3)*

This aspect also was apparent within the community centre. The community centre and the groups within it were *information grounds* (Fisher, Durrance and Hinton, 2004) where people gathered for diverse purposes but which resulted in exchange of help and information as a consequence. The basic skills/walking group was an information ground: members met twice a week as part of the group, the 'Shufflers':

*Through their "shuffling" they have learned many new skills and gained self-confidence, forging a strong and supportive social environment. The walking, writing and Web activities have laid the foundation for an information ground where people share information about a multitude of issues, from health and local news, to genealogy and local history, to photography and crafts. (Hayter, 2003)*

During everyday conversations and chat, information, help and advice were exchanged among group members.

### 7.3 On the estate: social networks

Residents generally found help and information by using their personal networks of family, friends, neighbours and regeneration workers, i.e., through word of mouth on the estate. This section explores the use of local networks that led to help and information.

#### 7.3.1 Word of mouth

*It's word of mouth. It's people who tell you. You find that's very valuable. Word of mouth: that's how I'd find out information. (MA5)*

*Word of mouth and stuff, you know. It's just what you hear, you know. Listening. Different people, different things. (JY6/7)*

Word of mouth was by far the most powerful and commonly used channel for information seeking, as the above statements by two of the research participants reveal. This was for several complex, inter-linked reasons, including concepts of trust, empathy and culture. Almost all research participants said that word of mouth was the usual method of communicating information,

However, there were inherent weaknesses, as information obtained from friends and family was potentially unreliable and erroneous, and people were vulnerable, accepting information at face value:

*Word of mouth is the most used information network on X Road Estate. The trouble is, it's like Chinese Whispers. The first person who has the information it might look like beans and chips. The person who's 10<sup>th</sup> in the line gets peas and burgers. And probably a different date to go with it. So word of mouth is the thing ... it is people, it's not paper ... generally word of mouth is the most effective and again the most damaging. Because they believe what they're told. (Joe, community development worker, W/J6)*

Research participants were asked why they thought word of mouth was the best way for them; they offered many reasons, including confidentiality, familiarity, immediacy and trust. People referred to word of mouth as *chatting* (JY6/7). The youth worker agreed that people used local networks to find out information, suggesting that

one of the reasons for this was because they lacked the skills to access information in other ways:

*With benefits, they find that from each other. Somebody maybe finds out what's due to them, and they pass it on to somebody else. That's certainly the network of the residents themselves, where they get a lot of the information from. Sometimes they haven't got the skills to access information. (W/LG8)*

Another key worker thought that a definition of information depended on one's perspective:

*A lot of it is oral. With speaking and listening skills, I don't think they have a problem with that. So I would say that they get their information from lots of different places. It's our idea of what information is that probably needs to change. (W/SJ13)*

The cliques on the estate passed information within their own cliques, but as they were often exclusive, this hindered communication of information. Many people would not use the community centre because of the cliques there and, as a result, were cut off from an important information source. The cliques prevented effective dissemination of information around the estate:

*It's word of mouth but it doesn't work very well. The thing is you get different groups: the men's group, the women's group and things do get passed around there. You've got different meetings, like the residents' meeting. It gets passed around there. You get the bingo group: things get passed around there. So it's usually through meetings. (S22)*

Not only did residents use their personal networks to find things out, workers on the estate used those same networks to disseminate information. The housing officer used residents' social networks to help distribute information, while acknowledging that it was not always effective, since 'people from one clique might not tell another what's going on' (W/N3). Likewise, the community centre manager harnessed residents' networks to pass information around the estate, although she noted that in other communities where she had worked, it took only three key people within the community to disseminate information widely:

*On this estate that doesn't happen. You have to use a much larger number of people and people's own networks are very small. So for example, we have managed to rebuild the pie and peas again. And I've used six networks for them to be telling the people that they know. I've used Krissy;*

*her network is about 10 people. Her network is her street and the surrounding houses, and that's what you find all over the estate. So, they've got a network: they've all got small networks. (W/LW5)*

### 7.3.2 Residents as information intermediaries

As suggested in the previous section, several residents saw themselves as information intermediaries who passed on information to others. This worked in two ways: some recognised themselves as passive information sources from whom people sought information; others identified themselves as active information sharers. June, an estate matriarch, was one of the former: *'People would come to me if they wanted to know anything'* (JS7). She believed this was because she was long-established in the community: *'I've been here since day one'* (JS7), and *'there's not much gets past June!'* (O83-3).

Lesley saw herself in the second category, as an active information sharer, as she passed on advice about various issues including debt problems:

*There's been a lot of people I know on the estate, who are my friends, and they said: listen, I'm in so much debt I don't know what to do. I'm like really past myself. The bailiffs are coming and everything. And I've told them to go to court and get an administration order. There's been about six people on the estate who I've said, go and get an administration order. 'Cos loads of people might just go get into loads of debt. It helped me out of a really big hole that I was in. It's single mothers that I've mainly helped who don't come up to the centre. (LB10/11/12)*

### 7.3.3 Self-reliance

Some people felt that they had to rely on themselves for information or help since they had no other source of help or support. Carol said that in general *'you just feel on you own don't you?'* (C11), and Sharon felt similarly isolated. This might have been because they were both relative newcomers on the estate and were still treated as outsiders, or it might have been in their natures to be self-sufficient. Sharon felt she had nobody she could trust apart from a friend: *'but there's not a lot she can do'* (S4) because her friend had her own difficulties; therefore she felt that *'I'd just have to sort it out myself, if it was serious enough. So, really I was like a loner'* (S4).

When Gerry was asked how he resolved any problems he might have, he responded similarly to Sharon: *'Well, you'd have to sort it out yourself. You learn to cope'* (GY7).

#### 7.3.4 Family

For many people, family was an important source of help, information and support. Carol, although previously stating she resolved her own issues, later declared she relied on her partner's family: *'I think family, yeah, they help us a lot. I'd turn to them if I needed help'* (C4). Carol would specifically ask Alex (her partner's aunt's partner) for help, as *'he always knows everything'* (C8). Through family contacts, Bob found out about the job as caretaker at the community centre:

*My son, he worked on the building of this (centre) for a few month. He was a member of the Community Action Partnership team, and he was going to a meeting and he heard about the job, so he notified me.* (BB1/2)

Phil, on the other hand, although relying on his mother to help him with practical things like doctors' visits, would not have asked his family for support, even though he trusted them (PS2/3). So although people relied on family for help, for some personal problems they would not ask their families for help, and furthermore, they would be careful in whom they confided since gossip travelled quickly round the estate.

#### 7.3.5 Friends and neighbours

Along with family, friends and neighbours were important information and help sources for many people. Several people cited Dan as a reliable source: he knew what was happening on the estate: *'He knows, aye. He'll get to know off a lot of people and that'* (JO7), and he was a good person to go to for advice (JS8). Others were similarly regarded as helpful and knowledgeable. Anne had a network of family and friends to whom she would turn for help and support: *'Alex, Lillian, Beatrice, my mam, Sarah and John, people like that'* (AS4), and she described these people as *'somebody who you can go to who'll know what you're looking for'* (AS4); in other words, they were knowledgeable and empathetic.

As well as asking people for information because they were knowledgeable, familiarity with the information source was important. Krissy's friends helped her with advice: *'I go to my friends for advice'* (K20). If she wanted to know about what was

happening on the estate, Krissy would ask her friends: *'cos they know about everything'* (K11). Helen talked to her friends about any problems she had. When asked why, she replied, *'it's often because I know they've had the same experience as me'* (O56-2).

On the other hand, some people said they would not look to friends for help and advice for various reasons: Janet liked to keep to herself (J5) because of prior negative experiences (J10), and Jim was wary about asking friends and emphasised the role of trust in information seeking (LJ30/31).

However, some workers had concerns that residents tended to trust information from their friends and family over that offered by 'experts' like them. This reinforced one of the weaknesses of the social networks within this particular community: people tended to trust familiar information sources over unfamiliar ones, even when the information was unreliable. Trust was more important than truth. The community centre manager found it frustrating that:

*Sometimes they'll ask your advice but then take the advice of their next-door neighbour. They'll say, I know you said I wouldn't lose my benefits, but Jane next door said I would, so I've decided not to take that job.*  
(W/LW9)

### 7.3.6 Workers as information intermediaries

Many residents relied on workers on the estate for help, information and support; these included housing workers, the education welfare officer, the social worker and regeneration-funded workers such as employment advisors, youth workers, the community nurse and the basic skills instructor. People found many workers trustworthy, friendly, empathetic, knowledgeable and discreet; qualities that enabled access. People often turned to trusted workers immediately there was a problem, rather than trying to resolve it in other ways; people did not have the confidence or the knowledge to use other routes to help and information and it was convenient to access a local, readily available information source.

Research participants considered specific workers good sources of help and information. Meg, the children's worker, was one of these. She and her staff provided a crèche in the community centre three mornings a week as well as a drop-in centre in a house on the estate. Meg was reliable, supportive and trustworthy, and she had many of

the qualities needed for trust to evolve: she had time, she listened, she was knowledgeable and she would find out information. Several women relied on her:

*I would go straight to Meg, 'cos she's the font of all knowledge I've found. She can help me with just about anything ... She can listen; she'll help you all she can; she'll do anything she can to help you. And if she doesn't know anything, she'll find out for you ... I would trust Meg with my life.*  
(Krissy, K5, K5/6)

*She listened to you; she didn't talk down to you; she talked to you; I felt comfortable with her; she knows how to have a laugh; she's got time for you, which I think you need around here ... somebody you can trust.*  
(Sharon, S14)

Listening skills and availability along with having a sense of humour were crucial in developing trust. Another trusted worker was Joe, the community development worker. Joe was 'a sound, sound person' (PS3), according to Phil, and he was 'like us really' (PS3). Everyone liked him as he was friendly and approachable, he had time, he was trusted and he kept confidences:

*He's approachable and he shows himself to be approachable. He's willing to stop for five minutes to listen and give you advice on where to go and who to speak to or whatever. (SA4)*

#### 7.3.6.1 Other inter-personal information sources

Although she did not have a direct informational role on the estate, Sally, the basic skills instructor, was drawn into people's lives because of her role. Because she was trusted, she was able to provide information and support in many areas, including health, recreational activities and relationships:

*Well, people have talked about things ... illnesses that they have mentioned and we look on the Internet. And things like...Agnes wanted particularly to find out about some family members and we were able to look on the Internet ... and sometimes we talk about the children. In one instance, John's daughter was having a few problems at school and I was trying to suggest ways that he could help her through. But, I mean, I'm not a counsellor, you know. (W/SJ10)*

Some residents said they would ask me for information, although they did not specify what type of information. Janet said if she needed information or help, 'I would ask you' (J9). Agnes asked if I would help her as she needed someone she could trust; however, I explained that my role was as a researcher and I was not qualified to help, and

suggested that she ask one of the regeneration workers for help. As long as research participants felt they could trust a new source, they seemed willing to take the chance, but the conditions had to be right: there had to have been time to get to know the person, trust in the person to keep confidences, and a feeling that the person was friendly, knowledgeable and would listen.

#### 7.3.6.2 Reasons for not using workers for information

Although many workers on the estate were trusted sources of information, and many residents felt comfortable accessing help through them, there was also a flip-side. Research participants chose not to use some workers for help and information. One of the reasons for this, paradoxically, was familiarity. Many research participants said they wanted to see residents employed in regeneration roles as they were familiar and trusted. Yet Lesley was unsure whether she would ask for help from two workers, who were also estate residents, as she knew them:

*I don't know if it's cos I'm too familiar with them. I mean I go to their, I've been to their houses, do you know what I mean? I socialise with them and that, so I don't think so. (LB4)*

Several residents revealed that they did not trust the housing workers, as they felt that they were ineffective. This was possibly owing to the fact that they lived on the estate and had employment, which perhaps put them in a position of power over the residents. John declared:

*I think the job's gone to their head, you know? They feel like, we're the bosses on the estate: you do what we tell you. You haven't got a say in the matter. They try to force their dominance. (JY 4/5)*

One woman suggested that that one of the reasons for not asking certain regeneration officials for help was because they lacked understanding and empathy:

*These lot, to me the big people in white ... I'm not going to beat about the bush; I'm gonna be serious now. They bring in people ... but what do they know? What do they know when you can't put your last, you daren't use your last £1, because your last £1 you need to put in your meter to keep your bairns warm. What do they know? They don't. [silence] (MA7)*

The community centre manager, a qualified information professional, was a familiar person to research participants; however, residents often did not approach her for help



and support, since she was 'always too busy' (C9) and had little time, a point that Sarah agreed with:

*[She] is always in a flap and always running around, and she just doesn't have time to spend, so it's easier to go and ask somebody who will slow down, stop for a few seconds and tell you. (SA4)*

This was an important lesson for the information profession: findings from this research indicated that personal qualities outweighed professional qualifications in providing access to information in this community.

### 7.3.7 The wider estate community

Generally, research participants discussed finding information within their social networks: friends, family and workers. Very few talked in terms of the wider estate community or beyond; there were two possible reasons for this – there were internal frictions within the estate, and participants had limited social networks. People tended to be cautious about the wider estate community, as they were unsure whether they could trust them or not, possibly because of the 'top estate' and 'bottom estate' rivalry. The majority of research participants lived on the top estate and their social networks did not extend to the bottom half of the estate. Sharon did not trust anybody within the community; she felt depressed and isolated and thought there was nobody to ask for help. When asked if she had people she could talk to about her problems, she responded, 'I don't trust a lot of people round here. Majority of people, I don't trust' (S17). Trust again emerged as a major factor in information seeking.

### 7.3.8 The primary school

Two residents mentioned the local primary school as a source of information. One of the mothers felt that the school staff provided important information about her children's educational progress and some health issues, and they were pro-active in sending out information:

*My kids haven't been going there too long. I mean, this is only the second year, but I've never had any problems with the school yet. They always give you good feedback at the end of term. The only information they send out is trips and stuff like that and head lice, stuff like that. It's awful: I've just had a letter about it this week ... and talking about health issues ... I*

*think they're very good about health and they give you all the information about it. (K16)*

Another mother described the school gates as a good information source, as this was where parents gathered several times a day:

*Outside the school gates, you know, they'll say: my baby's got thrush, and they'll say: you want to do such-and-such, and I'm like why don't they pass those things on? (LB13)*

The school gates were a useful social network and information ground that could possibly be exploited more effectively by information providers.

### 7.3.9 The community resource centre

Many research participants, when asked where they would find help or information, mentioned the community resource centre. John said:

*I'm most likely to find out what I need over the centre. (JY4) ... cos it's got a wide range of information. I think it's a wide range anyway ... they're far more knowledgeable than what I am. (JY6/7)*

The centre was a valuable information place partly because of its convenience: it was close by and there were expert workers available:

*Marion and Audrey, who work in this office, they'll talk to you about anything you want to know. Any type of problem, whether it's marital or financial or not, you know. There's always somebody. I mean, the girls from (X initiative) work from here. There's another girl just started last week, she has something to do with child abuse. She works from here, but she goes out a lot, sees the families in their own homes. So, any type of problem, there's somebody. If they're not here, they can get them for you: to come here and see you or go to your own home. But it's always private. It's always a private talk. (Bob, BB11)*

Respondents looked for specific attributes in an information source: convenience, availability, knowledge, helpfulness, trust and privacy. Jim used the centre to look for information for similar reasons:

*I come to the centre because they're really helpful and if I don't know who I need to contact, there's always someone here who does. Do you know what I mean? So it's like as if we build all our trust in each other and if I know something they don't know, I'll tell them, and if they know something I don't know, they'll advise me what I can and can't do. (LJ3/4)*

Jim and John both mentioned another important aspect: if those in the centre did not have the answer, they would find it. This was a common response: people used workers in the centre as information intermediaries who would direct them to the help they needed.

It was not only workers who provided help and information, residents helped each other in an informal way within the centre. The community centre was a thriving information space, and within it were other information and helping spaces such as the various interest groups, for example, the women's and men's groups and the basic skills class. Carol found the women's group was a good support network as '*you can talk to other women about things*' (C10). If Carol needed to know anything, she would find out '*by coming over here*' (C12).

However, for some people, the centre was not the place of choice, depending on the subject matter of the information. Dan felt he could not discuss certain issues, such as crime, with people in the centre or anywhere on the estate because of retaliation:

*You couldn't go anywhere round here, could you? Depending what the issue was. With most issues you cannot go to the police; you can't report it to the council, because there's retaliation. You can't go out your door or they'll torment the life out of your kids. Things like that. There's no-one really. Nine times out of 10 you've just got to ignore it and get on with life.*

[Would you come and talk to people in the centre perhaps?]

*Why you can't really, can you? You cannot trust them. Too many people like knowing your business. News travels round here faster than round Eastenders. If people saw you going into that office to talk about crime issues, straight away they think you're grassing. So that wouldn't help.*  
(DM4/5)

Nonetheless, for many, the community centre was a convenient, accessible place to find out things they wanted to know, whether through key staff or through more serendipitous channels such as chat.

## 7.4 On the estate: technology and media

Although social networks were the most widely used information sources, research participants also used a variety of locally accessible media to access information including computers, TV and newspapers. Some viewed computers with suspicion and fear, but there were noticeable changes in attitudes towards computers during the course

of the fieldwork, as some began to use PCs in the basic skills class. People tended to see leaflets as moderately useful but sometimes difficult to understand. Many residents found the community newsletter useful for information about what was happening on the estate. The notice boards in the centre were potentially useful as they displayed information about courses, babysitting, useful phone numbers, benefits, activities and things of topical interest locally. However, as they were often out of date, people tended to ignore them. The free local newspaper was a popular source of information, but it was not delivered on the estate. Everyone watched TV for news and entertainment principally, but also for Teletext, which many used as a source of a variety of information.

#### 7.4.1 Technology: computers and the Internet

Having a home PC was rare for research participants and only two participants had one; their children used them principally for games and for homework. Neither family had Internet access at home. However, there were six PCs and six lap-tops in the community centre and people could sign in to use them, and even though there was a cost involved, the convenience appeared to outweigh the price. As John rationalised, *'I come over to the centre and use the Internet. Sixty pence an hour is spot on'* (JY8).

The community centre manager believed the Internet was a good way for residents to find information, as:

*...you haven't got to talk to anybody. You haven't got to admit that you don't know, and research has shown that the Internet in terms of health for men, men's health issues, like if they think they might have prostate problems, that if they know how to use the Internet that's a great leveller. They don't have to lower their defences to the Internet, they don't have to admit things to the Internet, they don't have to tell the Internet that they've got other problems, they can just look...* (W/LW14/16)

The problem was *'that a lot...don't know how to use the Internet'* (W/LW14) and *'the difficulty is getting them to drop their defences to learn how to use the Internet in the first place'* (W/LW16). That situation was changing slowly as the basic skills class used the Internet regularly and this encouraged other people to learn (O15-1).

Internet users were divided into three types: those who used it regularly, those who were afraid to use it and those who had not used it but wanted to learn.

#### 7.4.1.1 Regular Internet use

There was a small group of people, mostly men, who used the Internet regularly to find out information. People used the Internet principally for job information and for information about hobbies such as art, fishing (DM2), local history and genealogy (O18-2). It was very popular amongst a core group of users. Some people enjoyed just browsing. Phil said, *'It's got information on. It's useful information. I like to look for football stuff'* (PS6). Dan had used the Internet *'quite a few times'* (DM15) for:

*All sorts. Just generally looking through. Went on a family tree site; tried tracing my name. Erm, poetry. Just all sorts of things. It's helpful. It gives you vital information. Tells you things you didn't know beforehand.*  
(DM15/16)

There was only one known incident of using the Internet to download pornography. People used the Internet because it was an easy way to access information locally, and it was a useful and knowledgeable source.

#### 7.4.1.2 Internet fears

Many people were reluctant to use the Internet as they lacked confidence, they worried about breaking it, they lacked interest and they felt intimidated. Joan said, *'I just don't like computers; I've got no fancy for them'* (JO9). Lillian revealed, *'I'm scared in case it breaks and there's people wanting to go on it, you get flustered'* (LJ24/25/26). Gerry was equally uncomfortable looking for information on a computer. During the basic skills group he was the only one not using a PC. I asked him why this was; he said:

*If I want to learn something I can learn it from a book. I can't stand all the click-click and being taken all over the place when in a book, you just have to turn over the page.* (O60-5)

Sally, the basic skills instructor, had introduced the group to the Internet and watched as residents began to overcome their fears:

*Hopefully we're breaking down a few barriers and it's not the scary thing it was, I mean, again with Gerry: he wouldn't go near the thing. Well you knew what he was like, and yet he was away with it the other week. And there's so much information that I feel Gerry would benefit from, you know. His interests are so wide. The Internet is so fantastic for that.*  
(W/SJ5)

So, with time and patience, many of those who previously did not want to use the Internet overcame their reluctance and fears and began to learn.

#### 7.4.1.3 *Intending to use the Internet*

Some people wanted to learn about the Internet. Carol was one of these and she saw the Internet as a useful and valuable source of information and as a crucial job skill. She was hoping to embark on a computer course:

*Joe [community development worker] says, what about computers. Why, you need it for being secretary [of the women's group]. So I thought, I might as well learn. I did when I was younger but I'm forgetting all of it, and this is the Internet and there's more Internet these days than anything else. If I went for a job, there's more computer work nowadays isn't there? They want computers to get jobs. (C13)*

The Internet was used more frequently and with more confidence as time went by, and it was becoming an excellent non-threatening source of information for people. Lillian, who initially had been terrified of touching a computer, proudly showed me the work she had done on the basic skills group's project: a calendar.

#### 7.4.2 Paper-based sources

Participants said they found leaflets and posters in the community centre helpful and useful – unless they were out-of-date. Leaflets were posted around the estate. Knowing what was happening locally was important to people, and posters and leaflets were ways of accessing local information in a local context.

##### 7.4.2.1 *Leaflets and flyers*

In spite of literacy difficulties within the community, several people said they found practical leaflets useful (MA5; K20). Margaret wanted to see health information leaflets available within the community centre:

*You know if they had one of them things that you put all different leaflets in, like you get at the doctor's. They could have one of them with leaflets of different places and whatever's going on. Health things. (DM17/18)*

There were, however, criticisms about paper-based information related to complex language, and to the usefulness, appropriateness and relevance of the information:

*They never supply you enough information. Sometimes they word the information and you don't understand. You pick up your leaflet and you read it and you don't understand it. A lot of leaflets should be worded in plain English. I might use the phone number (on a leaflet) but not a Web address. Even the phone numbers, sometimes they're numbers you have to pay for, and so you can't afford to use them. (Dan, DM18)*

Leaflets could be more useful by using clear language and by offering affordable links to additional information, such as toll-free phone numbers.

#### 7.4.2.2 Notice boards

The notice boards in the community centre had information about local activities and classes, about benefits for single mothers, as well as photos of events and lottery numbers. Outside the office were informational posters about day-to-day activities; however, several were out of date. People complained that the information was often out-of-date (JO9; BB15) and they did not rely on the notice boards anymore. Joan said, '*it's full of junk most of the time*' (JO9). Two people felt the posters on the notice boards were ineffective as information was better transmitted by word of mouth:

*... it's no good putting up posters; you have to actually go and tell people and if you can tell them they might get free stuff they'll come. (Audrey, AU2) and,*

*There isn't enough information, just posters being stuck up, all she's [the manager] doing is putting posters up. She should get people together ... and explain to them what's going on, which I think would be better. (Sharon, S11)*

Paper-based information relied on people to access it and to be able to read it; in order for information to reach its intended destination effectively and therefore be useful, the best way was to tell people.

#### 7.4.2.3 The community newsletter

However, another paper-based source of information, the community newsletter, was very popular; perhaps the fact that it was delivered to residents' homes made the

difference. Staff working in the community centre compiled the newsletter but production was erratic, and after targeted funding stopped, the newsletter ceased. Many residents enjoyed it and used it to find out what was happening on the estate; Joan indicated it was her preferred source of information (JO7/8). Carol had found information serendipitously about a parenting course on the estate by leafing through the newsletter (C3). However, again, the problems associated with literacy levels meant that it was not a vehicle of information for all.

### 7.4.3 Media sources

#### 7.4.3.1 Newspapers

Newspapers were important information sources for many people, in spite of low literacy levels. Job information was important. The 'items for sale' pages were of interest to residents, and some people enjoyed looking at houses for sale. Local news about the town was particularly welcome.

##### 7.4.3.1.1 The local newspaper

Participants enjoyed reading the free local paper and found it informative and useful. However, it was not officially delivered on the estate for two reasons. The distributors maintained that children threw them in the bin rather than delivering them. Sarah agreed, adding that *'nobody wants to come up on this estate and the kids never delivered them; they just threw them away'* (O11-3/4). Secondly, the estate was not a target area for advertisers because of its poverty, and therefore, distributors said, there was no value in delivering the newspaper on the estate. As a means of reciprocating, I took the newspaper in whenever possible, and residents would sit reading and discussing it all morning. Again, in spite of literacy problems, the paper was read avidly. Knowing what was happening in the wider local community interested people: *'it's good to find out what's going on lately round the town'* (O86-1). It was a valuable source of information, but unreliable in its availability.



#### 7.4.3.1.2 Regional newspapers

Residents enjoyed looking at the regional newspapers for similar reasons to the local paper: for local gossip and for job vacancies. Joan said:

*I read the paper, mind. I read the Echo and I read the Chronicle, the gossip paper, see what's going on. Karla comes up with it from the job centre. I'll just read it in here. (JO10/11)*

Participants tended to read others' newspaper rather than buy it. Phil would read the paper when 'Karla brings them up' (PS6). Lesley enjoyed reading the paper, but said, 'I don't actually get a paper. I read other people's but I don't actually get it myself' (K17). Gerry was an avid newspaper reader and did buy them himself, although he disliked the bad news:

*I get the Northern Echo and the Sunderland Echo. The local news. I read the papers in here, but as I say, I get them myself. Sunday I like all the papers. I like my Sunday papers, but you get frightened. Nothing used to happen in X, but there's been murders and the lot. A young lassie was murdered last year. Two days ago a young lassie was raped on the main street. It frightens you man, doesn't it? (GY9)*

#### 7.4.3.1.3 National newspapers

People tended to be more interested in local news than national or international. Very few people read the national newspapers. Like Gerry, people did not like bad news; Sharon said:

*I don't watch the news or read newspapers 'cos I find them depressing. That's me: I don't want to go back to being miserable. I've been there. (S18)*

#### 7.4.3.2 Magazines

Only one person, Sharon, mentioned reading magazines and for her, they were a source of entertainment rather than for information:

*The only time I read is a magazine. On a night time when I'm in bed trying to get to sleep. I'm lucky if I do read one story, then I'm away. I don't do much reading. (S18)*

So, generally magazines were used neither for information nor for recreation; this was probably owing to the costs involved.

#### 7.4.3.3 TV

Research participants watched the TV for the news as well as for a variety of programmes, including soaps and documentaries. Jim regularly watched the news on TV: *'I always watch the news at some time during the day and normally it's about six-ish'* (LJ20/21). Interestingly, Jim liked reading the sub-titles on TV as he felt it improved his literacy and his concentration:

*I have the sub-titles on. It's a concentration thing ... it helps me concentrate. And with me going to college, it's also helping us with my reading and spelling. It's good practice.* (LJ20/21)

Anne was more indiscriminate in her TV watching and said she would watch *'anything really'* (AS9/10) and she *'watches the news a lot'* (AS9/10). Like many others, Lillian did not like bad news and said, *'I don't like the news about that bombing and that. You don't know what the world's coming to'* (LJ20/21).

People used TV as a source of entertainment and information as it was easily accessible since it was *'in your own home'*.

#### 7.4.3.4 Radio

Although for most people TV was a source of both entertainment and information, few listened to the radio. Only two participants mentioned the radio: Sharon liked it for *'the music channel'* (S18) and said she would not listen to news on the radio. Eileen enjoyed listening to the radio in the evening before she went to bed as it helped her relax. She had heard a programme about how to cope with death (O22-5), which was timely and helpful for her.

#### 7.4.3.5 Teletext

Teletext was a popular information source, and many research participants used *text*, as they referred to it, to find out information on a variety of subjects, including football results, holidays (C12,13), local news (DM13/14; LC10), lottery numbers (DM13/14),

weather (DM13/14), cinema listings (DM13/14) and playing games. Participants found Teletext easy to access, believed it to be knowledgeable and liked the fact that it was '*in your own home*' (SB19). Jim was keen on Teletext, and he said that he would look for information on:

*... football, telly or anything to do with news or anything. The range is really good what they have on Teletext. Really anything you need to know. You can get your weather forecasts; you can get the lottery, TV, all your news, holidays, the lot. It's a really good source of information and it's in your own home.* (LJ18, 19)

However, not everyone saw Teletext as a convenient source of a variety of information. Krissy said, '*I think it takes too long*' (K17), and Gerry said he had never considered using it (O74-2).

## 7.5 Off the estate

The town centre was approximately 30 minutes' walk from the estate, but psychologically it felt further away. When asked about the availability of local information sources, Dan said, '*there should definitely be something local otherwise we've got to travel*' (DM8). Dan's meaning of local was influenced strongly by his small world experience: by *local*, he meant on the estate. Jim expressed a common view: that people would access information off the estate only '*if it was important enough*' (LJ4). People were comfortable going to the doctor's office or to other health professionals to resolve health-related information problems. They were also comfortable with going to the job centre and to workers at the local college with whom they had established a rapport. However, people tended to use the CAB only when all other avenues of information enquiry had been exhausted, and they preferred not to be involved with the police at all.

Participants tended to distrust and dislike official agencies as information sources, as they found it daunting to have to ask for help or information from outside of their small world. Jim said he did not trust any government agencies as they had made his life difficult (LJ22/23).

Participants sometimes used the phone to access external (off-estate) help and information: this was problematic for some and is therefore discussed below. The following sections examine the various off-estate information sources.

### 7.5.1 Phone use

One of the ways that research participants contacted outside organisations was by phone. People did not use landlines: none of the participants had a phone at home. Some had mobile phones, but others had no telephone access other than public phone in the community centre (O46-3). Using the phone was easy for some: Joan was confident using the centre's phone and used it regularly for health information (JO9). She used her mobile phone for the same purposes, if she had money on it (JO9). Sharon was also confident using the phone and said she would never hesitate to use it if she needed to find out anything: *'I'd ring up and ask if I could speak to somebody who's in charge'* (S13/14).

However, not all residents were comfortable using the phone. Some people lacked confidence in using telephones, and community centre workers helped them. Phil did not like phoning unfamiliar people and he asked the deaf worker to find out about the deaf awareness course in which he was interested (PS2). Marion described how, as part of her job as community worker, she helped people make phone calls. She said many residents were afraid of phoning companies they were indebted to (MA5/6) and she made the calls with them.

### 7.5.2 The benefits office

Several research participants used the benefits office for benefits-related information. Although Jim felt the *system* did not acknowledge his mental health needs (LJ23/24), he was confident in his dealings with the benefits office. However, he believed there was a language and communication barrier, and that officials used obscure language, which was a difficulty as *'a lot of people don't know academic words for things'* (LJ23/24). John likewise had no reservations about using the benefits office, saying, *'Any problems with benefits I just go to DHSS and get it sorted there'* (JY6), and Joan agreed: *'if I want to know anything I'd contact the benefits agency. If I've got any money on my phone (I'll call) but if not, I'll walk down if it's fine'* (JO9).

So, using the benefits office for information pertaining to benefits was not difficult for most people, although some found the bureaucratic language a barrier.

### 7.5.3 Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)

Overall, the CAB was a useful and helpful information source, especially for debt-related help. However, the CAB was used only in dire situations: *'if it was important enough'*, (LJ4) or after all other avenues had been exhausted, when it became *'the last resort ... cos we were in a bit of a mess at the time'* (LB10/11). The CAB was *'the best place to go to'* (LJ21) for debt-related help, and several people had turned there. Joan described her situation after her husband left her several years previously:

*When my husband left us, I was trying to survive on benefits and he left me in a whole load of debt. I went down there to see if I could get something sorted out. They [CAB] were helpful, yes. (JO9/10)*

Krissy had also used the CAB for debt information, although interestingly, she did not see her debt problems as information problems, nor did she associate the CAB with information:

*It was when I was in a bit of trouble a few years ago with debt. And I found them very useful. Why I never thought about them for information. I'd go back there, yes. I would go to them for information. (K17)*

Residents who did not use the CAB explained that it was because it cost money to get there – it was in the town centre, the opening hours were difficult, the CAB staff did not answer the phone (J9) and waiting for an appointment put them off (C14). However, for those who used it, the service was helpful and the staff knowledgeable; they would go back there if necessary. Research participants used the CAB only when they felt in dire need, debt problems being the main cause.

### 7.5.4 Local colleges

Three research participants used the local colleges for two different information and help needs. Phil preferred using the job information sources at college, rather than the benefits office; this was likely more convenient for him (PS5). In Jim's case, his college tutor, who was helpful and sympathetic, had supported him with his mental health problems and had helped him resolve an issue with his severe disablement pension. He felt he was getting no help from other information sources:

*I went to my counsellor ... and she done all the phoning up for us. She said: this man is disabled. He's not going to get any better, so yes, he will be on the sick for the rest of his life. (LJ22/23)*

Krissy also used the college library as an information source: she was taking an NVQ in child-care and had used the college to obtain course information (K18). Similarly, Sharon had used the college library: *'I went there to get all my information on health and safety for my NVQ'* (S17).

#### 7.5.5 City council

Only one participant, Dan, discussed using the local city council for advice and help. Dan had concerns about his children's safety and had contacted the council, but he had no confidence that they would help resolve his problems, as he believed that the system was too bureaucratic. He also feared local retaliation (DM4/5), and described the situation and his frustrations:

*There's been talk about getting this cut blocked off so that no cars or bikes could get down. But I think it's been chucked out the window ... that's the same no matter where you go in England. Councils always wait until someone's killed before they take action. That's the truth. We've been in touch with the council because we were supposed to get some road humps put up and apparently there were three who went against the bumps. So they've got to take it to the second stage where they have to see if anyone's got any more queries ... it's a case of waiting for that result. (DM9/10)*

#### 7.5.6 Health professionals

Research participants' health problems were many and various, including both physical and mental health problems. Many suffered high blood pressure and stress and were on long-term disability benefits. People were generally comfortable going to see their local GP or health professional about health issues, even though this often involved a complex bus journey. People spoke routinely of visiting psychiatrists, psychologists, pharmacists and other health specialists: they regarded going to the doctor as normal and not outside of their cultural framework.

#### 7.5.6.1 GPs

Generally, participants viewed doctors as accessible information sources, believing them to be knowledgeable, helpful and confidential. Sharon preferred asking for health information from her GP, as she valued the confidentiality:

*The only person I'd turn to now is the doctor. That's the only one. He's the only one I can turn to. Just the doctor, 'cos it's private. It's like two years ago I found a lump; I spoke to my friend about it, but I felt that there wasn't enough support there. (S15/16)*

However, Joan had experienced anxiety and frustration trying to sort out her youngest son's health problems. She had sought help from a variety of health professionals when she could not get hold of the special milk he needed. She found the process of finding information laborious and frustrating and felt she was being given the run-around:

*Well, the hospital's looking into it 'cos I told them on Friday. And they were getting in contact with the GP and they were going to ring the pharmacist. When I went up to the pharmacist last night, no milk come in, I went off it up there. I was like a raging bull. So they gave us the number to ring the place (manufacturer) and I rung this morning, just not picking it up at all. (JO4)*

Communication problems like these resulted in unsatisfactory outcomes at times. A further example of this was a resident, who, in spite of visiting the doctor regularly, had no clear idea of the diet he should have been following to regulate his diabetes and whose psoriasis did not improve.

#### 7.5.6.2 Mental health professionals

Two parents discussed using psychiatric or psychological help for their children. Carol had sought advice and support with her six-year-old son, who had behavioural problems, with no real success: *'I've tried health visitors, he's been to see a psychiatrist, psychologist, so I've just been managing on my own'* (C3). Likewise, Joan had experienced behavioural problems with her 12-year-old son, and she had sought help from the psychiatrist. Joan had concerns about the medication's side effects, and she *'... phoned his doctor and asked him'* (JO3). It was a natural and easy step for her to take to find the information. Joan, like Carol, seemed confident in her interactions with health professionals, although the results were not always satisfactory.

#### 7.5.6.3 Samaritans

Sharon was the only resident who mentioned looking for help from a charitable organisation: the Samaritans. She had called them in desperation during a suicide attempt a few years previously, as '*they were the only ones left to turn to. Last resort. Very last resort*' (S16). They had saved her life and she was grateful for that.

#### 7.5.7 The job centre

Few people mentioned the job centre as a place they would use for job information. Some felt it was too far away – it was in the town centre – and involved transportation costs, which they could ill afford. They preferred to use the job-seeking service within the community centre or at college, word of mouth and local newspapers, as these were convenient and they trusted the community worker. Bob said he felt that the job centre kept out-of-date information and that the staff held back jobs for family and friends; he no longer trusted them for job information:

*I've gone to the dole, looked at a card: oh, can I apply, you know, have an application form for this one please? Oh, it's not on record. So you go to somebody else: oh the job's filled months ago. They're still on the board though. You know they were that far out of date but nobody took care to go round. So you're looking for jobs, and: oh great, there's a job here; and you find it's gone ... and the good jobs, you know, they're keeping. I know exactly what they're doing, they're giving them to their friends and family before they give 'em to anybody else. (BB2/3)*

#### 7.5.8 The police

Although personal safety and fear of crime were help needs, residents did not ask the police for help nor did they always report crimes or misdemeanours, as this was tantamount to treason within the community:

*...nobody reports anything to the police because nobody wants to be seen as a grass. If you're seen as a grass, you're likely to get your house torched or your windows broken. (O74-4)*

People did not want to be seen talking to the police: '*anyone seen talking to the police is asking for trouble on this estate*' (O26-3). Furthermore, residents felt the police violated confidentiality. Dan explained:



*I don't trust them. The local bobby that we've got, I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. Certain families know other people's business. That's against his procedures but he still does it; I've heard him myself.*  
(DM8/9)

However, although most participants did not view the police as a potential source of help and information, two abused women, who had not known where else to turn, did go the police (although these instances were not within this community). Sarah was one of these, and she had found information about how to escape her abusive husband: the police had directed her to the refuge (SA1). Helen had also sought help from the police.

#### 7.5.9 The public library

All participants were asked if they would look for information at the public library. There were mixed opinions about it and people were often negative or indifferent. Those who had used the library or who had considered using the library were few, but they thought it knowledgeable, useful, helpful, good value and quiet – opinions given after the library visit. Some had used the library to learn about hobbies, children's activities, children's homework, and local and family history or to rent videos or to use the Internet.

##### 7.5.9.1 Library users

Those who had used the library were not regular users. One respondent had been a regular library user, but he had been banned several years previously for non-return of a library book (GY3/4). He initially did not reveal the ban, but told me he had stopped going there. Gerry had mixed feelings about the library, which were perhaps influenced by the library ban:

*That's a very poor library. Even books you order: 'I've never heard of that; we can't get it here.' Some people say it's a great library, but I don't find, you know, I don't have a very high opinion. The staff can be awkward. So I've given up going down there. They've got a very poor selection down there; it's mostly love books. I'll tell you what, they have a great reference library down there ... you know, local pictures and local writers.* (GY3/4, 4)

After I organised a library trip for a group of residents (see Appendix G), Gerry resumed his regular library visits and seemed happier about going there.

Lesley felt confident using her college library because it was within the realm of her experience: *'I'm used to going to the library now with being at uni'* (LB10). She had suggested to staff in the community centre that the mobile library visit the estate: *'I've said for years, could we not get a public library, like the mobile library, that comes and parks in the car park for a few hours'* (LB9/10), but nothing came of her requests.

It was common for participants to view the library for reading (not for them, but for others) but not for information. Those who used the library and who were aware of what it had to offer were positive about it; however, these people were somewhat in a minority within the context in that they valued learning and education.

#### 7.5.9.2 Library non-users

The majority of research participants did not use the library for information nor had they considered the library as place for information. Some said they saw the library as books rather than information: *'just all these books'* (JS10) and *'just for reading books'* (K18). Marion said that in terms of finding information, *'I never thought about a library, barring library books.'* (MA5). For many, the public library lay outside their cultural frame of reference. Lesley felt:

*I don't think many people go to the one in [town]. I think when they go to [town], they do their shopping and pay their bills and come home. And that's it. I don't think they think, oh I'll just have a look up the library. I don't think they think of going to the library for information. No, I think they just see it as a place where you go and get a book and that's it. I don't think they know there's like information there.* (LB9/10)

Joan saw the library as a place outside her current life world, but thought she might use it when she was older: *'I don't go near a library! I couldn't sit in a library. Probably when I'm older I'll think, oh I'll go up to the library, you know what I mean?'* (JO10/11). She seemed to imply that the library was a space for older people with nothing else to do. Anne, likewise, described the library as a place she *'wouldn't be seen dead in'* (AS10/11); however, her age (16) might have affected her opinion.

The social worker believed that the cultural gap was too wide for many on the estate to bridge:

*A lot of people on estates like this, I'm not being disrespectful, but they don't access them (libraries). It's full of people, it's not people like here; it's middle-class people.* (Patrick, W/P4)

He believed that residents felt uncomfortable outside their everyday environment and that this was a class issue since residents would not venture into what they saw as a middle-class institution.

#### 7.5.10 The women's refuge

One resident mentioned the refuge as an information source. Sarah maintained contact with the refuge after she moved onto the estate and later became a committee member. She felt positive about the refuge, even though it was a reminder of a difficult time in her life, and women there kept her up-to-date with information they felt she would find useful:

*I still have the refuge, who, if I need information on anything, they'll keep going on help lines and groups. If you phone and say, can I pop in for a cup of tea, they're brilliant, you know. And if they find out something they think you should know, then they ring up and say, do you know such-and-such is happening? (SA3)*

#### 7.5.11 Friends off the estate

Only one person mentioned asking friends off the estate for information; Phil said that he had '*friends from other parts; a lad I used to work with before. If there's any jobs coming up, he'll let us know*' (PS4). People did have friends and family in other communities but did not speak of them as sources of help and information. People tended to make friends and relationships and find information inside the estate.

#### 7.5.12 The town centre

Few people thought of the town centre as a place to look for information, although John said that when he wanted to find out about buying a new camera, he went into the electronics shops in the town (JY9). For many people, unless it was urgent, the town centre was too far to go, and as Jim pointed out:

*There's people who can't get to [town]; I mean [town's] over a mile away, you know what I mean? You've got to get a bus or a taxi and they're both expensive no matter which way you look at it. (LJ15/16)*

## 7.6 Chapter summary

- *Research participants favoured trusted information sources that were local, convenient and inter-personal, which resulted in heavy use of narrow social networks – including workers as well as family, friends and neighbours.*
- *Some research participants were more proactive in seeking help and information than were others.*
- *Using off-estate health professionals, such as GPs, nurses, mental health specialists and pharmacists, did not appear to present problems for residents. However, respondents were sometimes frustrated when they could not resolve health problems to their satisfaction but did not know the next step to take.*
- *Similarly, some people did not appear to receive effective or adequate help with their health problems as their health remained poor.*
- *The benefits office was used when necessary for continuation of benefits.*
- *The CAB was used as a last resort usually for serious issues such as debts.*
- *Information seeking, particularly outside the comfort zone of the estate, required confidence on the part of the information seeker. There was a link between confidence and learning and pro-active information seeking.*
- *If residents did not have the confidence to access help or information from 'experts', they remained tied into advice from friends and family, which was possibly erroneous or incomplete. Furthermore, they consequently did not extend their social networks or gain bridging capital.*
- *Some research participants spoke of having to sort out problems alone.*
- *Some residents were information intermediaries and would share information with others.*
- *Trusted workers were commonly used as information sources or as information intermediaries.*
- *There were barriers to using some workers for information: lack of time, poor listening skills, lack of empathy and, paradoxically, familiarity.*
- *Personal qualities were more important than professional qualifications.*
- *Participants used newspapers, Teletext, TV, leaflets and the Internet (which became more prevalent as the fieldwork continued) for information.*

- *The estate community centre was a thriving information ground.*
- *People tended not to favour official agencies such as the police, the benefits office, the city council, the job centre and the library for resolving problems or seeking help.*
- *There was a pattern of participants coming to a halt in their information behaviour – they did not look further or they stopped looking for the following reasons:*
  - *No awareness that there was (more) information available*
  - *An acceptance of the received information as comprehensive*
  - *A lack of energy to find out more.*

## 8 Barriers to information

### 8.1 Introduction

Having explored the everyday lives and the information seeking behaviour of the research participants, it was evident that there were many obstacles to accessing information. The sixth objective of this research was to:

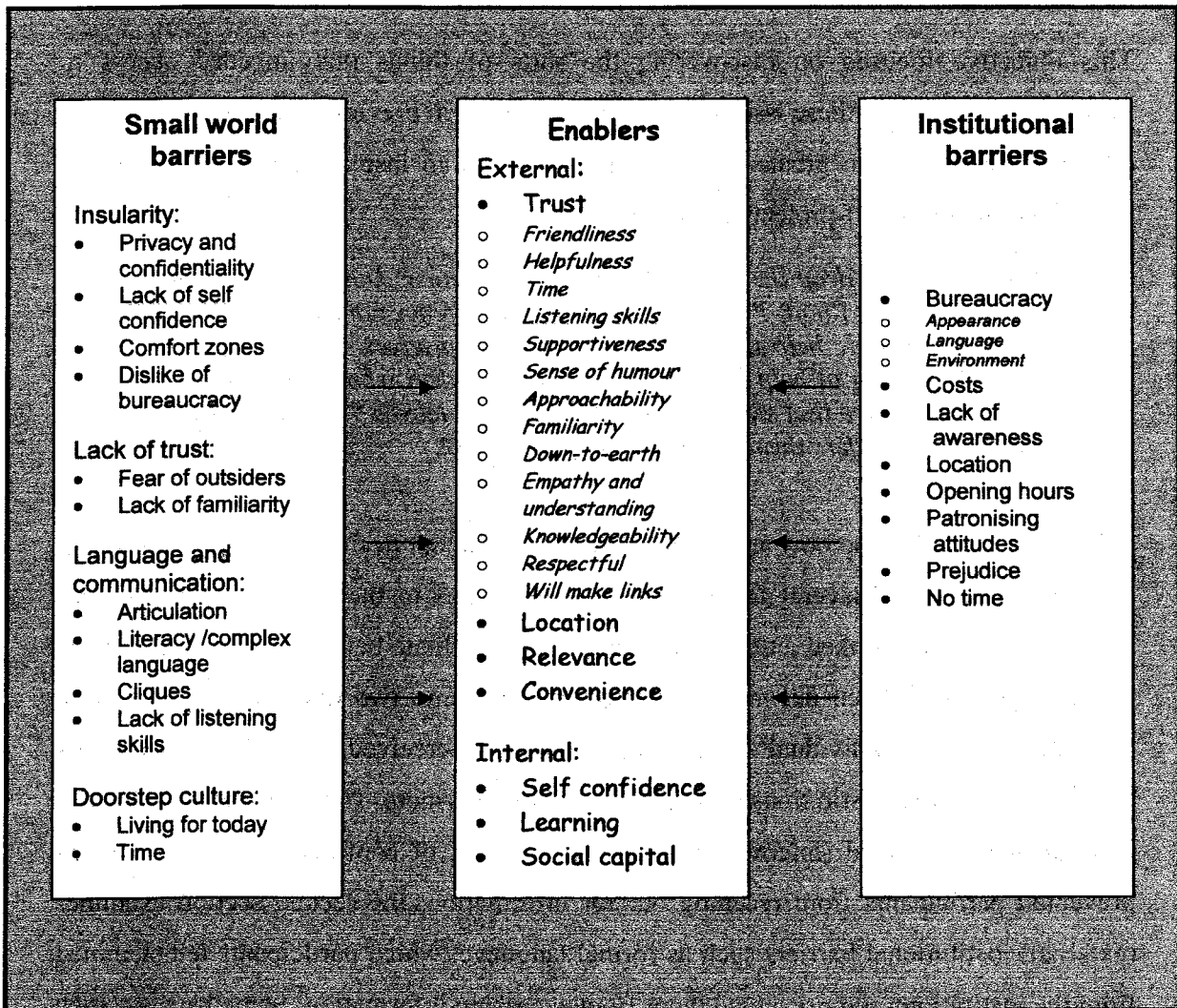
*investigate the barriers or perceived barriers to information access from the participants' perspective.*

This objective focused on discovering the sorts of things that impeded access to information. Although these issues have been alluded to in previous sections, this chapter explores the barriers in greater detail. The estate was an insular community in which people put up many self-protecting barriers.

*People have to drop their defences in order to learn. And that's just what we've got on X Road. People have got so many fences and barriers up to even let anybody help them or even to help themselves. The only people who are willing to help themselves are the outsiders who come and don't seem, don't have that state of mind. But that still leaves 90% of the people who are X Roaders through and through. (W/LW2)*

When discussing how and where they would attempt to find information, research participants revealed several factors that were obstacles to the process. The obstacles were complex, inter-linked and inter-dependent. To facilitate better understanding of the barriers, they have been deconstructed and separated into two discrete sections: those emanating from the individual's small world and those perceived by research participants to stem from formal institutions such as information providers. The first section examines cultural or small world (internal) barriers such as lack of confidence and trust, which prevented participants from reaching out for information; the second section examines (external) institutional barriers such as formal language, which participants felt stemmed from the institutions and prevented them from accessing information. Some barriers, such as bureaucracy, were double-sided: it was a cultural barrier, as residents were afraid of outsiders and were intimidated by bureaucratic language and formal appearance, but it was also an institutional barrier, as it was often the institutions themselves that perpetuated these problems. Similarly, time was double-sided and problematic, as

participants needed time to develop trust and to be listened to, but on the other hand, institutions did not necessarily have the time to give. Trust was one of the main barriers to accessing help and information owing to the insularity of the estate. Figure 19 depicts the tensions between residents' internal personal and cultural barriers and external institutional barriers, which reinforced barriers making them more difficult to overcome. The *enablers* depicted in the middle column were ways of overcoming the tensions and barriers, and they will also be explored in this chapter.



**Figure 19 Tensions between cultural and institutional barriers**

The barriers to help and information explored in the following sections are those expressed by the research participants; however, the researcher imposed the thematic categories.

## 8.2 Small world barriers: personal and cultural aspects

Many of the barriers to help and information seeking stemmed from personal and cultural aspects of everyday life on the estate. The small world barriers have been classified into four sub-sections: insularity, trust, language and communication, and a 'doorstep' culture, which have then been further divided to explore various aspects in more detail.

### 8.2.1 Insularity

As discussed in detail in Chapter 5, people on the estate lived insular lives: they found it difficult to trust strangers, they were uncomfortable outside their customary environments, and they valued privacy and confidentiality, disliked formality, and lacked self-confidence. These issues all contributed to barriers to accessing help and information. People in the community helped each other and did not go outside the estate for help unless there was a serious problem:

*I think from my own experience and people I've known, it's all helping each other. If one of us has got problems, say taking drugs, she would turn to somebody else who has been through it, or their family's been through it, and ask for advice that way. I don't think people will have gone for outside help unless it's really serious. (Krissy, K21)*

#### 8.2.1.1 Privacy and confidentiality

One reason people did not look for help outside of the community was because of a concern about privacy and confidentiality: they were unhappy about anyone knowing their 'business'. It was vital for them to be able to trust the information source to keep personal information private. Where this was not the case, there was a barrier. Dan did not trust the local police officer to keep information to himself: '*Certain families know other people's business. That's against his [PC's] procedures, but he still does it. I've heard him myself*' (DM8/9). Eileen refused to attend open CRUSE sessions because '*I don't want anyone knowing my business*' (O22-2).



Lillian similarly felt strongly about keeping her life private: *'I'm not telling nobody about my life; that's my own'* (LJ17/18). For her, as for others, it was important to know that whatever information she divulged, *'He's going to keep it to himself. Some of them, they won't'* (LJ11/12). Sarah confirmed that asking questions was perceived as an invasion of privacy: *'If they think you're asking questions, then they'll close right up'* (SA10). Lesley agreed that trust and confidentiality were the key to helping people access information. She declared people would talk only if they *'know it's not going to go any further ... trust's a very big issue'* (LB11).

Paradoxically, although people valued privacy, the closed nature of the community meant that *'everybody knows each other's business'* (JY4), and *'round here - they know more about yourself than you do'* (C8). Nonetheless, privacy and confidentiality were important factors and presented barriers to accessing information, particularly from sources outside the community.

#### 8.2.1.2 Dislike of bureaucracy and formal institutions

The community development worker suggested that because of cultural factors such as insularity and low self-confidence, residents distrusted bureaucracy and found it difficult to make the leap outside of their community to access information:

*They've stayed within so many square miles to be perfectly honest. And so many square people. You know, and if nobody has an answer for it, if none of them have it, then I'll just not get it. And therefore, 'I know I might suffer for it but if I don't think about it, then it'll go away' attitude and I've seen that. I've seen people in them situations. Where they can't make the leap; it's too much of a challenge to get an answer to solve a problem because (a) it's too far away, and (b) it's doing something which you're not educationally happy to do, being confident to talk to somebody who might have a tie on. So there is a cultural thing in the sense that people might have had bad experiences, you know. A condescending housing officer, and once they've met one, everybody's the same. (W/JK11)*

The norm was to try to resolve help and information needs inside the estate. But even within the centre, the level of bureaucracy was difficult for some residents to become accustomed to: signing in and out of the computer room was seen as time-consuming and unnecessary, even though statistical evidence of usage was required.

Participants distrusted people and formal institutions that were not like them, and they lacked the self-confidence to overcome their fears. Krissy was afraid of those she called *professionals* and said she lacked confidence talking to people outside of her community and her class:

*Professionals scare me; you would have scared me because you knew what you were talking about and I didn't. I had confidence within my own people, my own class, that sort of thing, but going to people I didn't know, professionals ... terrified. (K12/13)*

A further barrier to participants' expressing information and help needs was the fear of reprisals. People did not always feel they could express their needs for help in, for example, crime situations, as they were worried about negative repercussions within the community; it was safer to turn a blind eye than to be seen as a 'grass' using the police or other formal institution.

#### 8.2.1.3 Self-confidence

Research participants were afraid of new places, new situations and new people and many lacked the self-confidence needed to overcome their fears. In their everyday lives, this was not usually an issue; however, because people were afraid of things outside their comfort zones, they tended to stay within the community even when outside help could have made a difference. In common with most of us, these people were afraid of the unknown and of experiences lying outside their comfort zones; however, since research participants' life experiences were limited, issues that many others would take in their stride presented barriers to residents. For many it was daunting to look for help. Marion told of people being too afraid to use the phone to call companies with which they were in debt (MA5/6). She told of a young woman with a baby who had nowhere to live and was frightened, as she had nobody to help her (MA7). For many, the lack of self-confidence and resulting fears were obstacles to information access, and without help and support from friendly, trusted sources, the process simply did not move forward.

The community development worker felt that people did not know the first step to take to get the help or information they needed. He believed this was an important dimension, explaining that people often asked for help as soon as there was a problem, rather than attempting to resolve it as far as they could:

*I would never have asked for assistance first. And these people have asked for assistance first. And I'm thinking well, why do you need to ask for assistance cos I wouldn't have needed to ask. And that's the difference I guess. I don't need the support network as much as they need it. Or a support ... just an everyday issue, which might be about writing to a gas company to say my bill's too high ... know the person, make the call, write an appropriate letter, get a result from that. They're like, god, god, oh no, how do I get help with this. It's a problem before it's a problem. (W/JK9)*

People did not have the self-confidence to resolve problems on their own. Joe believed this was a barrier, and *'that is a bad thing because you're starting straight away to be in a position of inferiority because you are looking for somebody else to help you'* (W/JK8).

Those who seemed self-confident were often the ones who were active information seekers. Jim, for example, had undertaken a course in communication skills at one of the local colleges and was proactive in seeking help and information:

*If you sit back, you get nothing. You've got to go out and look for things. You've got to go and look for information; it doesn't just come to you. Nothing never just comes to you. (LJ23)*

Krissy acknowledged that *'I think I've come so far in just two years [of learning]'* (K4), and she was confident about getting any information she needed: *'I'd know where to get information from'* (K20). Learning was an enabler as it increased people's self-confidence and self-belief. Having self-confidence enabled people to seek out help and information. Exposure to cultural 'others' such as trusted key staff was also an enabler as they helped build people's self-confidence.

### 8.2.2 Lack of trust

As previously mentioned, the insularity of the estate led to a lack of trust in other people and in other places generally. Trust, or lack of it, was one of the main barriers to residents seeking help and information, particularly outside their social networks. Because this was such a crucial issue, this separate section explores the ramifications of the concept of trust. Research participants spoke often of the importance of trust; it was a vital component in help and information behaviour: the information source needed to be a trusted one whenever possible. Residents did not define trust in terms of the accuracy of information, but rather as a personal attribute. Almost all the research participants mentioned trust as the single most important factor in seeking help, yet they found it

difficult to trust people, especially 'official' types from outside their small world. One said:

*I think you need somebody around here you can trust. People won't give other people their trust. I think you should get a regular counsellor in, but I don't think anybody'd trust 'em. A lot of people don't give trust out, not round here. (Sharon,*

The community centre manager recognised the enormous barrier that lack of trust represented, as it prevented people from asking for and receiving information:

*The residents' natural instinct is to throw up a big thick wall that prevents anybody from intruding on any part of their life, even though that person may have information that can help them in their life. Or to ask for it, especially in front of other people, is seen as a weakness. (W/LW1/2)*

Lillian, a resident, offered her personal perspective:

*I find it difficult talking as it is. You know what I mean, so I would have to have somebody I could really trust. And like, know them first. I would like to get to know people first because it's very hard for me. To trust somebody you've got to know their background and that. (LJ4/5)*

Trust was essential to an effective process of information acquisition. Therefore, lack of trust, which was the majority of research participants' *modus operandi*, was a major barrier.

#### 8.2.2.1 Building trust

Building relationships with residents based on trust was vital, and maintaining them was equally important. It took time and effort, as the basic skills instructor explained:

*That trust issue is huge. When I first came ... it took me ages and ages and ages, and I'm still trying. Interrupting people's conversations just to strike up some kind of rapport and relationship, you would never normally break into someone's conversation. It's quite cheeky, really. But you have to build up some kind of relationship. (W/SJ5)*

Trust building involved meeting people in their comfort zones and chatting; the CAB manager explained: 'They're very wary of anybody. You've got to be there so they get to know you and tell you little things, and eventually you'll be accepted, you know (W/C8).

This was reiterated by the youth worker, who acknowledged that it took time to get to know people and to develop a trusting relationship:

*And that's another thing about the people – they are very mistrustful. Until they know somebody really well. If you don't live on the estate, you're a foreigner anyway. (W/LG3)*

Trust encompassed many different qualities, such as approachability, confidentiality, familiarity, friendliness, helpfulness, listening, privacy, supportiveness, understanding and time. Respondents expressed the need for these attributes in order to form trusting relationships. These positive aspects of trust, which function as enablers to information access, are discussed individually in the sections below.

#### 8.2.2.1.1 Approachability

Research participants preferred to find out information from people they knew and could approach easily. This meant that they tended to neglect formal sources of information. One of the estate housing officers, in response to my telling him I felt intimidated and shy when I first visited the estate, said that was a positive thing as '*residents can't stand people who get into their face*' (W/N3). So, a gentle approach was necessary. The community development worker was a person to whom many people would turn for help as he was '*approachable and he shows himself to be approachable. He's willing to stop for five minutes*' (SA4). Approachability also included having time for people.

#### 8.2.2.1.2 Familiarity

Research participants found it difficult to trust unfamiliar 'strangers' and 'foreigners'. Alex considered Janet a stranger even though she had lived on the estate for three years (AL1), and she acknowledged that '*sometimes they don't accept people on the estate*' (J6). People were wary of newcomers on the estate: '*you're wary of people at first. We seem to have a big influx of what we call foreigners*' (BB9). Anyone new on the estate was treated with suspicion. Gerry also pointed out the aversion to 'strangers':

*But what I notice on this estate, they don't like strangers. They don't take to strangers, like. You know you've got to be careful, you know what I mean? You know, they get a bit worried about strangers. They've set two people on in the office. Nobody's very happy about it. Things like that you've got to be very careful. (GY10)*

Familiarity was important for research participants, as many people felt uncomfortable talking to strangers. Paradoxically, familiarity presented a barrier to some people. Lesley explained that some were reluctant to go to the workers who lived on the estate for help:

*... there is Audrey and Marion on the estate, but I think there's a lot of people won't go to them neither. Daft, like: she's related to so-and-so, or she'll tell so-and-so, you know what I mean? (LB11)*

People were reluctant to disclose personal information to them because of close ties and fears that confidences would be betrayed.

#### 8.2.2.1.3 Friendliness and helpfulness

One of the ways of overcoming barriers was by being friendly and helpful. Several research participants, including Lillian and Alex, stressed the need for people who came onto the estate *'to come and share a bit about themselves and be friendly'* (AL2). Jim agreed, *'it's just getting involved'* (LJ11/12). However, this could be hard for strangers to do, as the atmosphere could be unwelcoming, although, as Sarah pointed out, *'I think they're friendly up here, as long as you're prepared to mix in with them'* (SA3).

Krissy trusted the children's worker for information because of her helpful nature; Krissy explained, *'she'll do anything she can to help you'* (K5/6) and this helped build trust in their relationship. Help and information seeking was more effective when the source was known to be a helpful one who was also knowledgeable or who would take time to make links.

#### 8.2.2.1.4 Knowledgeability, expertise and making links: information intermediaries

Research participants chose to ask for information from sources they knew to be knowledgeable. There were key people, both workers and residents, on the estate who were thought to be knowledgeable. People talked in terms of asking somebody *'who knows about it, you know'* (MC5) or who was *'more knowledgeable than what I am'* (JY4). Krissy mentioned the children's worker as a knowledgeable source of help: *'... she's the font of all knowledge I've found. She can help me with just about anything'* (K5).

A willingness and ability to make links was also important for the research participants. They needed to be assured that the person they asked for help and information would be prepared to find out for them and make links by liaising with others when needed. This was one of the reasons people relied upon the children's worker for help; she stated, '*... if I don't know where to get help, I'll look for it. And I access different people*' (W/MT2). The social worker echoed the importance of making links:

*Often I haven't got the expertise. I would telephone the CAB. Welfare rights. Benefits. Problems where I'm out of my depth. If I can do a quick letter or a referral to Social Services, so be it. If it's something that's going to take up a big chunk of time, refer it. (W/P2)*

#### 8.2.2.1.5 Down-to-earth nature

When asked what attributes a person should possess in order to connect with residents, Krissy said, '*They've got to be down-to-earth. They've got to not talk down to you or anything like that. They've got to treat you as real people*' (K14). People were very much aware of their status as the local pariahs and felt particularly sensitive about it. They detested being condescended to and being patronised: '*I hate that member of staff and everyone knows she hates people from this estate and she talks down to them*' (O80-4).

#### 8.2.2.1.6 Sense of humour

A sense of humour was a quality some research participants felt was important. Lillian explained what she liked about the community development worker: '*I know Joe, and we have a big joke on and that's what I like*' (LJ7). Sharon felt the fact that the children's worker had a good sense of humour contributed towards building a trusting relationship: '*she knows how to have a laugh; she's got time for you, which I think you need around here ... somebody you can trust*' (S14). Jim tested me by wisecracking to see '*if you like a laugh*' (LJ30/31) before he began to trust me.

#### 8.2.2.1.7 Supportiveness

Ongoing support was needed for people to take the small steps needed for them to move forward in their lives:

*They need the continuous support and that's what's missing on the estate, so I come back to the fact that there are skills there, there are desires there, but it is different, they need so much help. They're so immature, so child-like. And those little steps are what you need and it doesn't matter what agency you come from, you have to have someone that acknowledges that. And you'll win. (W/K16)*

People on the estate were generally supportive of one another, which was possibly one of the reasons why information seeking remained largely within the community. Carol enjoyed going to the fortnightly women's group because, '*you can talk to other women about things*' (C10). Having local support was important and it enabled information exchange.

### 8.2.3 Language and communication

Research participants discussed language and communication issues such as: articulation, internal communication, literacy issues and listening skills, all of which presented barriers to information behaviour.

#### 8.2.3.1 Articulation of needs

One of the barriers to accessing information was residents' inability to clearly articulate their needs. People lacked confidence and experience in articulating information needs. The centre manager described Eileen's situation:

*Eileen has never been confident enough to either articulate needs or information enquiry, to actually get information to help her be empowered to make her own decisions. Overall even if she had information, she's not empowered enough or self-confident enough to make decisions. (LW/8)*

Lillian recognised her own lack of articulacy, saying, '*I find it difficult talking*' (LJ4/5); she found it difficult talking to people outside her world. Participants lacked experience articulating information and help problems and communicating with 'outsiders'. This was apparent during some of the interviews, when it felt that we were sometimes talking at cross-purposes; however, this might have been their lack of articulation or my own.



#### 8.2.3.2 Internal communication: cliques

Although useful information was disseminated internally on the estate via social networks, because of the tensions among various cliques on the estate, it was not always an effective channel. Within the community, the cliques were also an obstacle to information communication. The community centre was a place for all estate residents to find help and information on any topic, but some people refused to go there because of the cliques and consequently missed out on potentially useful resources. Some people living on the estate did not know the community centre existed. This could have been because of poor promotion, but it could also have been because the estate was physically divided in two by a wall, and people from the bottom half tended not to access the top estate.

#### 8.2.3.3 Listening skills

*It's a huge responsibility isn't it 'cos you're dealing with people's lives, but nine times out of 10 all they want you to do is listen to them. That's the most important thing, first and foremost, the listening. (Meg, W/MT2)*

Listening skills were an important quality, and for some participants, simply being able to talk about their problems with another and gain affective support and reassurance were really important. Many residents mentioned listening skills as an attribute to accessing the help and information they needed. Carol enjoyed a parenting class in the community centre because *'it's good, I mean, they listen to you'* (C4). Conversely, the reason she felt the local housing office was unhelpful was because *'they don't seem to listen. They say they'll solve the problem, but they never do'* (C5). Krissy, who helped in the crèche, also felt listening skills were among the most crucial skills:

*What they really want is somebody to listen to them and to be supportive. I mean take money issues, I know there's nothing we can do, but we can listen to them. (K9)*

#### 8.2.3.4 Literacy and complex language

Poor literacy skills were barriers to people accessing both written and oral information. The community worker pointed out that people were afraid of official letters, so they ignored them, which often exacerbated problems:

*Sometimes problems occur because residents don't read letters properly, or they ignore them because they're official, which probably means trouble, so it's too scary. (O90-2)*

Not only was literacy a barrier, but bureaucracy compounded the issue: official or formal language caused fear for some because of semantic barriers and the assumption that *big words* contained hidden, potentially threatening meanings:

*The big words. The big words is: what do they want to know about me? What do they want to know about my life? I'm not telling anybody about my life. That's my own. Information – it's cutting them down to small words. They frighten people (LJ17/18) ... [information] it's a very big word and it frightens me. It still frightens us when you said information. That's – what do they want to know about me. (Lillian, resident, LJ27)*

Complex language was clearly a barrier to resolving problems and to finding information particularly via the more formal information sources. Lillian was frightened about her interview for this project as she was worried about the word *information*; the word was alarming and it was a semantic barrier (see also Section 6.2).

Dan similarly found complex written language a barrier to accessing information. Not only was informational literature scary as it was written in incomprehensible and unfamiliar language, but it made people feel inferior because they could not understand it:

*Sometimes they word the information and you don't understand. You pick your leaflet up and you read it and you don't understand it, 'cos it's written in really long words, or even if you might be able to read it, you might not understand them really long words. A lot of leaflets should be worded in plain English rather than in Latin or whatever you call it. No matter what you look for, you always come across one of them where you've got to ask someone else what it means. You should just be able to read it and say, alright, that's for me; that's not for me. (DM18)*

There was evidently a need for written and spoken information to be clear, understandable and unambiguous.

#### 8.2.4 Doorstep culture: right here, right now

Participants wanted information immediately available and on their doorstep. A delay could mean that people gave up, as their horizons sometimes did not extend past the end

of the day. People tended to do things instantly and not think about the future: *'everything is so last minute because residents simply don't plan ahead. They don't see further than the end of the week'* (O32-4). People wanted to know things immediately and did not want to go through complicated routes to get information. The basic skills worker explained,

*I quite often get people who haven't enrolled in classes and they'll say, 'Can you just...?' They really only want, and I think this is quite important really, they don't want the whole baggage that goes with it, they just want to know what it is they want to know. They don't want to enrol in a class and come for weeks and weeks, they just want you to say 'yes' or 'no' or 'that's the answer.' They don't necessarily want the whole package. They just want an answer to their problem. (W/SJ10-11)*

Lesley agreed, saying, *'People won't wait. They want everything done there and then.* (LB6). One of the reasons the community centre was seen as a good source of information was because information was immediately accessible and convenient: *'I'll find out as soon as I come in here'* (C11). However, in this context, information meant what was happening in the community.

A 'doorstep culture' was evident: *'people on the estate want everything on their doorstep and they aren't prepared to go out to search for what they want or need; this includes information'* (O12-2). People wanted immediate local access to information. Without it there was an information gap as problems remained unresolved, either because the answers were not available immediately or they were beyond their sphere of knowledge.

### 8.3 Institutional barriers

Institutional barriers to information seeking were compounded by personal and cultural barriers stemming from everyday life on the estate. Participants felt that formal institutions erected and perpetuated these barriers because of their bureaucratic nature.

#### 8.3.1 Bureaucracy

One of the main institutional barriers residents identified was bureaucracy, which people saw as a situation of 'us' and 'them'. The language of bureaucracy was a barrier (as previously discussed) as were issues such as formal appearance and the formal nature and

environment of institutions. The following are further characteristics of bureaucracy that informants found difficult.

#### 8.3.1.1 Formal dress

The formal dress-style of officials was a barrier, and residents felt uncomfortable around people who dressed in a more formal manner. Gerry said apropos of a meeting he was about to attend with regeneration officials, *'I'm not looking forward to it. They look down on us. They come wearing their ties and bow ties and make me feel inferior. I'm not wearing a suit'* (O78-2). Their formal dress alienated Gerry and made him aware of the gulf between officials and him, causing him to feel inferior. Bob agreed with Gerry, but for different reasons: he felt the formal clothing masked an indifference to the community, saying:

*People do like get resentful of the collar and ties when they come in cos they don't seem to be helping out at all. They're a figurehead. When it comes to the nitty gritty about fighting to get things up and going, they just do not want to know you. (BB13/14)*

#### 8.3.1.2 Formal nature of institutions

Research participants felt uncomfortable outside their comfort zones, which were usually within the estate. They often lacked the experience and the self-confidence to initiate information seeking outside their environments. The education welfare officer related the story of a young man who had gained a place at a college several miles away from the estate. Keith drove him to the college on the first day, went with him through the entrance, introduced him to his new department head and showed him the library where he could get help. When it was time to go again, the young man was completely overwhelmed and said he did not think he could cope with it:

*Eventually it twigged, it was just far too big a change. I said, look trust me, give it one more go. Let's go back, and this time we drove round the back. Went in the back door to the workshop. This is where you brought me before; what happened to the corridors? We don't have to use the corridors; you don't have to see all those people ... and then there was the bus issue. So I had to travel through with him ... on the bus. It mattered. I swear if you added it up, it was a week and a half's work. But it ended up with him getting a year at college. But they need the continuous support of it. (W/K16)*

In order to cope in a new environment, the young man needed support, which took time and commitment. New experiences outside their comfort zones were stressful for some, and people needed continuous support to enable them to make connections and to feel comfortable. The fear of formal institutions was related to the insularity of the small world of estate life. Helen, who was very quiet and kept to herself, said she did not like going to formal places for information as:

*I hate being asked questions and I hate the word appointment. If I hear that word, I don't want to talk. I need to feel at ease with the person cos I can't just open up. (O56-2)*

### 8.3.2 Cost

Cost was a barrier to accessing information in three areas: Internet access, phone calls and bus fare into the town. Residents had to pay sixty pence an hour to use the Internet, and for many this was too expensive. One man, however, felt the cost was acceptable as it was convenient and printing was free: '[it's] *spot-on, you know what I mean? Sixty pence covers everything. The printouts here you get for free*' (JY8).

Cost, along with fear of communicating with formal information sources, was also a barrier to using the phone to resolve information and help issues. Many people found the cost of making phone calls expensive, particularly to the types of agencies they needed to contact as they were regularly put on hold (MA14). Some could not afford to use the phone to resolve information or help problems. The price of calls to advice and information centres was prohibitive: '*the phone numbers, sometimes they're numbers you have to pay for and so you can't afford to use them*' (DM18).

Accessing information in the town centre involved using public transport or taxis, which many people could not afford as Jim explained, '*There's people who can't get to [town]. I mean, [town]'s a mile away. You've got to get a bus or a taxi and they're both expensive*' (LJ15/16).

### 8.3.3 Lack of awareness

A further barrier was a lack of awareness that help and information were available. Lesley, for example, suggested that '*Many people don't know that they can get help with debts*' (LB10/11), and that many were unaware of the help within the community centre, such as Karla, the employment advisor:

*There's still a lot of people who don't know that Karla's here. They'll say: Karla? Karla who? Just cos we know who they are, doesn't mean that people on the estate know who they are. (LB9)*

So, within the estate itself, people were unaware of important information sources and often did not know where to get the help and information they needed. They often recognised a problem, but did not know the next step to take other than asking one of the multi-agency workers on the estate. Information providers need to promote their availability and expertise so that there is more awareness of the resources available for people who might need them.

#### 8.3.4 Location

The location of information sources was another barrier: participants wanted locally available information for two reasons. Firstly, research participants stressed they did not want to leave the community to access information, and would do so only as a last resort for reasons linked to the insular nature of the estate and to issues of trust, self-help, privacy, confidentiality, convenience and self confidence. The employment advisor supported this theory: *'residents want information right in the community. Outside of the community may as well be on the moon'* (W/K5). People on the estate looked for help outside of the estate only on serious issues, since for day-to-day information *'we're all helping each other'* (K21).

Secondly, information needed to be locally available because of the distance involved in travelling to the town centre: *'there should definitely be something local; otherwise we've got to travel'* (DM8). The town centre was over a mile away, and it was difficult for some to get to. Lillian, who had mobility difficulties, suggested:

*Some of them who want to go down, mebbes it's the travelling. Mebbes they can't travel. You know cos they can't get. It's difficult for me going down there. You know what I mean, because me, I can't. (LJ14)*

Location and convenience were the main reasons participants used the television and Teletext for information: *'it's right there'* (PS6), *'it's in your own home'* (LJ19) and *'it's an easy way of finding out'* (PS6). They were also the reasons for using the community centre: *'it's in the community, just close by'* (LJ15/16).

### 8.3.5 Opening hours

Only one person mentioned opening hours as a barrier to using an information source: Janet felt the CAB was '*hard to use*' (J9) because the opening hours were awkward for her and it took too much time.

### 8.3.6 Patronising attitudes

Outside workers were sometimes felt to be patronising in the way they spoke to residents. Residents described their dislike of patronising attitudes towards them (BB14), describing a worker who '*treats us like children*' (MC7). A second example was of a librarian who had visited the estate to do a story-telling session:

[whispers] *But she wasn't very nice. Oh no, she was too in-your-face. The residents didn't like her. She was talking at them, not to them.* (W/MT11)

People were very sensitive about being patronised and, understandably, disliked it, associating patronising behaviour with formal institutions and workers.

### 8.3.7 Prejudice

The local stigma towards the estate also created barriers. The local police officer felt there was prejudice within the police towards the estate:

*It's not just breaking down barriers there; it's breaking down barriers here, and trying to tell people. Tolerances. I have great difficulty with other police officers because they come onto the estate, and they treat the people like shit. They drive on, they treat people like shit, and they drive off.* (W/AM4)

Certainly, within the town, prejudice persisted towards the estate – it was seen as a pariah. Residents were aware of the local animosity towards their community, which reinforced the insularity of the estate. Some residents felt the stigma of the estate prevented them from using formal information sources. Anne had never considered using the library and wondered if it was related to her surroundings, '*I dunno if it's with living up here or what. I wouldn't go*' (AS10/11).

### 8.3.8 Time to listen, to understand and to help

Residents wanted help and information sources to have time for them – time to listen, to understand and to help – to develop trust. Information providers, however, needed to have the time to give. Marion, who lived and worked on the estate, believed it was crucial to know about people's lives in order to understand their problems and to begin to help them. This could not be achieved short-term because it took years to build up trusting relationships:

*You never get the full story. I'll tell you why. You don't get the beginning and you don't get the end, you only get the middle. Until they get to know you, you don't get the full hat. Now these (regeneration workers) are people who's only new on this estate. But somebody who's lived here, you know. But any information they want, we'll tell them ... and to establish a good thing, it doesn't just take a piddly three years; you're talking years, you know. (MA7)*

For the basic skills instructor, investing time in people was important to gain trust and to move forward with her work: *'But it takes a long, long time. And that's the thing isn't it; you've got to invest the time'* (W/SJ4). One of the reasons many residents did not ask the community centre manager for help was because she had no time. Sarah said, *'it's easier to ask somebody who will slow down ... and tell you'* (SA4). Joe was a trusted information source because he was approachable, he listened, he kept quiet and he had time. He acknowledged these were important enablers:

*I rarely say no, especially if I know it's only a two-minute job; I'll always stop and do two minutes' worth of talking and listening. It's worth more than saying, hang on a minute I'm busy writing something. I can stop. You've always got two minutes for somebody. (W/JK7)*

Time was a valuable and essential factor in helping residents on this estate access the help and information they needed.

## 8.4 Overcoming tensions and barriers: information enablers

*If the person's right, they'll accept that information. It's a lot to do with the person they get it from. (W/LG2)*

As discussed in the previous sections, there were many barriers to information access; conversely, there were also many factors that enabled access to information. Research



participants tended to find information through people they could trust: the right person made all the difference. The right person was caring, friendly, helpful, a good listener, had time, was supportive and was approachable. These attributes are often referred to as *soft skills*. Soft skills and the ability to communicate with others were factors that enabled the small steps needed to bring help to people's lives.

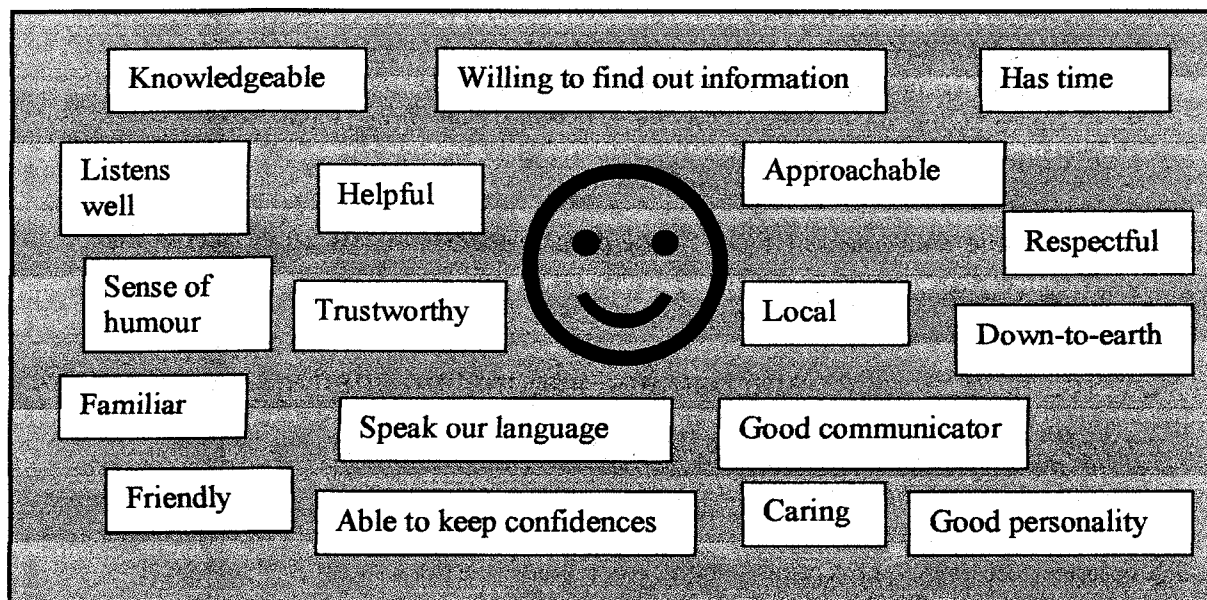
In order to confirm the enablers residents faced in seeking help and information and to look at ways of improving access, participants were asked to consider hypothetically where, what or who would be their ideal information source. The question asked was:

*If you had a choice about an ideal place or person you might go to for help or information, what would that person or place be like, and where would it be?*

People gave several suggestions: they wanted information to be available locally and from a trusted source who was friendly, knowledgeable and who listened to them. Their pictures of an ideal person and place are discussed in the section following.

#### 8.4.1 The ideal person

*It's the person doing the job who's important. You have to have good communication skills; you have to be able to get on with people; it's not about qualifications; they have to be able to put themselves in people's shoes; you have to care and be trusted (W/MT/1)*



**Figure 20 Enabling access: the ideal attributes of an information provider**

As Figure 20 demonstrates, research participants had strong, specific opinions about the type of person to whom they would turn for help and information. The ideal person needed to be a good communicator who would *'speak our language...use small understandable words'* (LJ17/18) and *'be able to listen as well'* (LJ29) and *'build up relationships with people. Trust, yeah'* (LJ29/30). He or she needed to avoid patronising people and *'... [be] down-to-earth. They've got to not talk down to you or anything like that. They've got to treat you as real people'* (LB11) and *'respect us'* (PS8). The person needed to be *'knowledgeable [and] help you anyway he can'* (J10), and familiar, *'I would ask [them] because I know them. I'm comfortable'* (SB7/8/9). Trust and confidentiality were vital factors: *'... somebody who you trust. Somebody who's not going to carry the tale on to anybody else'* (JO6/7). Participants wanted someone who *'can listen'* (K5/6) and who will *'find out for you'* (K5/6). The ideal person would have a sense of humour and a good personality (LJ11/12).

#### 8.4.2 The ideal place

Most participants asserted that *'there should definitely be something local'* (DM8) – on the estate. This was partly because of convenience and they felt it was too far to go into town, but also because people were not comfortable outside their own community and they wanted to talk to a familiar face. Joan said she preferred to get information:

*... on the estate where there's people I know, where you know who you're talking to and that, 'cos you don't really know who you're talking to sometimes, do you? I'd rather have it up here and then it's local; you're not trailing into town all the time. An information place, you know.* (JO8)

Lillian wanted information easily available: *'in the community, just close by, so you didn't have far to go'* (LJ15/16). Lesley believed it was a combination of person and place; she felt that it was important to have a knowledgeable person in the community centre to help people, possibly an outreach worker:

*I think it would be good if somebody could get all this information, could go round to the different groups and say: listen, I'm in the centre, I'm here so many days a week, this is what I can give you information on.* (LB12)

Research participants wanted access to information within the community and described the person to whom they would go to for help as friendly, knowledgeable, trustworthy and down-to-earth. These factors when combined resulted in research participants' feeling more comfortable and confident about accessing information. Having relevant information available locally was also important and this was demonstrated by the success of one of the learning groups in the community centre: the local history group.

Learning about local history was not threatening, as it was part of the environment in which they lived. Observations made during the first class noted, *'everyone – including me – found it fascinating: lots of murmurs of approval'* (O4-1). The weekly sessions strengthened the group and became the focal point of the week for many. The group was a successful way of bringing people together and of breaking down barriers: *'there was a real feeling of camaraderie and much laughter and light-heartedness at the meeting'* (O9-1). Alex felt comfortable in the group because *'we all know each other'* (AL2). Residents were extremely disappointed when the class finished and a promised second session failed to materialise. A by-product of the learning process was that by bringing people together in an informal situation and focusing learning activities on residents' interests and lives, it was possible to improve self-confidence and attitudes, which ultimately had a positive effect on information behaviour.

The barriers and enablers discussed above were those cited by research participants, which the researcher organised thematically. In addition, from a close exploration of participants' lives, I would suggest three further enablers: self-confidence, learning and social capital. These three enablers were inter-linked and it appeared that those on the estate who were self-confident, had experience of learning situations and had achieved a measure of social capital were much more able to access information from a variety of sources whether on or off the estate.

## 8.5 Chapter summary

*Research participants described many barriers to information seeking, which fell into two categories: those emanating from the individual's small world and those perceived to stem from formal institutions such as information providers. Participants were quite clear about factors that enabled information access and these were also explored.*

*Small world barriers that impeded access were:*

- *The insular nature of the community: a lack of self-confidence, a strong need for privacy and confidentiality, a dislike and fear of bureaucracy.*
- *Cliques on the estate impeded the flow of information.*
- *A lack of trust in people who were seen as outsiders or unfamiliar.*
- *Language and communication issues. The word information itself was a semantic barrier for several participants, and complex language was potentially threatening and imbued with hidden dangerous meanings. Participants needed help and information providers to have strong communication skills, including the ability to listen; the lack of this was a barrier.*
- *The 'doorstep' culture on the estate, which meant that participants wanted information available 'right here, right now'. Information had to be timely and convenient.*

*Institutional barriers were perceived as being:*

- *Bureaucracy and the formal nature of institutions, including the mode of dress, the formal environment and the complex language.*
- *Cost and location: the bus fare to get to the institutions in order to access information. Furthermore, opening hours were often inconvenient.*
- *Perceived institutional attitudes such as prejudice and patronising behaviour, which also affronted participants.*
- *Participants' lack of awareness of services that could help them.*
- *Information providers who were perceived to have no time were not accessed for help and information.*

*Factors that enabled access were predominantly based on the information source's inter-personal skills, such as friendliness, helpfulness, willingness to devote time and to listen, approachability and trust. Participants also preferred information sources to be knowledgeable, convenient and local; however, this was less important than inter-personal skills. In addition, it appeared that those who had experienced learning opportunities and gained a measure of self-confidence and social capital found information seeking to be a relatively straightforward process.*

## 9 Reflections on the research

### 9.1 Introduction

Lofland (1971) maintains that reflecting on the research experience is vital, and that the researcher should:

- describe private feelings, e.g., were you sympathetic? what emotions did you experience? how did you protect yourself from emotional entanglements?
- elucidate how decisions were made about what was difficult and what was easy about interviewing,
- describe any social barriers encountered, and
- explain how much time was spent in the field.

In the account of this research, the researcher has attempted to ensure that all aspects of the research experience have been explained, including methodological issues, emotional aspects and any problems encountered. This chapter considers issues arising from the whole research experience.

### 9.2 Reflections on the methodology

Access into the community was a methodological aspect of the research that I expected to be difficult. Initial entry into the community centre as a fieldwork setting was not problematic (as described in Section 4.4); however, gaining the trust and acceptance of the research participants was a long process. This has been described more fully in Section 4.6.3 but warrants further reflection to consider how it could have been done differently. With hindsight, I feel my cautious approach worked well as participants fairly soon realised I was not a threat and that they could begin to trust me; this approach was a natural one, which suited my personality. Had I been more overtly confident and assuming, I think the research would have been unsuccessful. Small tentative steps were appropriate in this research context.

As a researcher in an unfamiliar and somewhat intimidating environment, I felt unsure about the data collection methods I intended to use early in the fieldwork; my journal entry describes my dilemma:

*Might it be better to use a written questionnaire? A direct approach might be less of an intrusion into their lives. Also tape-recording is so intrusive. I also know some would not be comfortable going into the (interviewing) room to be interviewed. It's too foreign to their lives. Perhaps I should just chat in the café without going to a separate room and taping. Perhaps I could just pop a few questions into the conversation every week for as long as it takes. I am concerned though that if I don't tape, I won't have lovely verbatim quotations to use and that I won't remember enough. I also worry about the 'qualitativeness' of the research if I use a questionnaire. (October 12, 2001)*

In this study, the use of informal episodic narrative gave in-depth insight into local attitudes, culture and information behaviour in ways that would not have been available through quantitative methods. Joint interviewing was also a useful technique that encouraged people to participate who might not normally have been agreeable to being interviewed. The weakness is that the more confident participant might try to dominate the interview, and this happened in both cases. However, I was sufficiently comfortable with participants at that stage to be able to suggest that the more confident one allow the other to participate. It was a technique worth trying and one that might be useful in future similar research.

The interviews took place in a small room in the community centre away from the café, a comfort zone for most participants. Participants understood that it was necessary to find a quiet space, as interviewing in the café would have been impossible because of background noise from the radio and from conversation; however, the interviewing room was small and impersonal, with a table and two chairs along with filing cabinets. I grappled with how to resolve this problem and with how to help respondents to feel more comfortable, but did not come up with a workable solution. One interview was conducted at the participant's place of work in the crèche. She was comfortable in her working environment, and this made me feel more comfortable too. My comfort levels were dependent on participants' comfort levels: when they seemed uncomfortable, I also felt uncomfortable. Another difficulty in taking people out of the café was that everyone else knew where they were going, and it thus made them the focus of attention and possibly gossip.

In spite of the trust developed with residents and my attempts to avoid upsetting participants, some were concerned about being in an interview situation as it was reminiscent of the formality they disliked. The situation, rather than the researcher, made

them feel insecure. One participant asked for help with the interview and asked whether she needed to complete any forms. I assured her that she did not need to and that I would help her in any way I could. Another was worried about being interviewed in the centre and asked me to interview her in her home; however, when I went there, she was out. She was eventually interviewed in the centre, but she needed reassurance from others that it was going to be OK. She asked to look at the list of questions and said, 'I can't answer some of those questions.' Again I assured her of her expertise, of the confidentiality of the research and of her having to say only what she wanted to.

Another problematic issue was that discussing the research project itself with residents sometimes made them feel uncomfortable, eliciting responses such as '*I'm not clever*' or '*I don't know anything about that*' (O49-4). I made every attempt to bolster participants' self-confidence by explaining that they were experts in their own lives and they knew more than I knew and by working on the trust factor.

It was also difficult moving from being in a relatively 'passive' and non-threatening role as an observer to being an actively engaged researcher within this context. Research participants became used to my passive role and I felt they might be upset by the change. They had become used to my being a helpful part of the furniture and I was unsure how they would react to a change in status. My journal read:

*I need to ask more focused questions but I worry about turning people off. Right now, it's easy to almost pretend I'm not a researcher. It's quite comfortable just kind of blending in. When I start to ask more direct questions, my role will be more obvious. How will that change things? Right now, residents seem comfortable having me around. I do ask a few questions, but they are always stemming from or connected to the ongoing conversation. In order to ask focused questions, I will have to take charge of the conversation. They will have to follow my lead, rather than me always following theirs. How will that change the dynamics of our relationship? Will it put them off? Will they still want to talk to me? How will it affect data collection? (February 19, 2002)*

To minimise any negative effects, I interviewed the more 'friendly' participants to begin with. I felt it was inadvisable to be too pushy or too intrusive in asking questions, as the residents' trust needed to be maintained. This meant that monosyllabic answers such as 'I don't know' or 'yes' and 'no' could not be pushed too far and this sometimes resulted in disappointing interviews that did not have the rich illuminating data I hoped for. Whyte's

(1943) informant, Doc, admonishes him for asking too many questions; this rang true in this research context:

*Go easy on that 'who,' 'what,' 'why,' 'when,' 'where,' stuff Bill. You ask those questions and people will clam up on you. If people accept you, you can just hang around, and you'll learn the answers in the long run without even having to ask the questions. I found this was true. As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to questions that I would not even have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interviewing basis (p.78).*

On the other hand, this observation demonstrated the weaknesses and difficulties in the methods. Participant observation seemed at times to produce richer results: just chatting was far less intrusive than interviewing, even though the interviews were as informal as possible. Much of what I wanted to learn about the research participants was achieved through participant observation, although the interviews clarified many aspects further.

Another problem stemmed from taping the interviews. Research participants were asked permission to audio-tape; only one participant refused and notes were taken immediately following that interview. Using a tape recorder was the preferred method of recording and transcribing data as I had concerns about losing the richness of direct quotations. Without taping, I was afraid to rely on memory; as Silverman (2000) notes, *'depending on our memories, we can usually summarize what different people said. But it is simply impossible to remember'* (p.829). One of the research participants gave untruthful answers and when I asked him about it, he said it was because of the tape recorder; I had to convince him that it was confidential and for my benefit only. Interestingly, had participant observation not taken place, affording a grounded knowledge of the community, his answer would have been taken at face value. One of the first interviewees warned against using the recorder; he said it would put people off and he was right; it also was a physical barrier.

A further issue to consider for future research was that participants often asked me what I was doing on the estate. I explained my research repeatedly, sometimes to the same person. On occasion, I told residents that I had explained this before; for example, a year after I met Lillian, she asked, *'what do you do here?'* (O67-1). I replied in a teasing way, *'I'm doing research about how people find information. You know Lillian, as I've*



*told you before*' (O67-1). She had forgotten or I had failed to explain myself properly: I hate to think it was the latter.

And finally, the difficulties of member-checking were very disappointing and were my fault, as I left it till the last minute. In hindsight, I should have organised a lunch meeting with participants and had a discussion in order to draw out more detailed responses. Although the written responses received clearly supported the research findings, they were not detailed or incisive. The loss of the written responses was upsetting and attempts to recapture the data were unsuccessful. This aspect was the most disappointing of the research.

### 9.2.1 Reflections on data analysis and presentation

One of the difficulties of researching and representing a culture that is commonly seen as disadvantaged, is to try to produce a picture that is holistic and not focused simply on the negatives of social exclusion. Participants told many stories, some of which the researcher was not comfortable in revealing, as it felt like a betrayal not only of their confidences, but of their lives. Fine and Weis (2002) agonise over how to present the data they uncovered and wrestled with how to '*display this voyeuristic dirty laundry that litters our database*' (p.277). The authors explore the dilemmas associated with the mundane details of everyday life. They suggest that researchers often leave out the boring details of everyday life in order to concentrate on '*the exotic, the bizarre and the violent*' (p.279). They further maintain that '*we need to not construct life narratives spiked only with the hotspots*' (p.279). Fine and Weis (ibid) also suggest that it is irresponsible to suggest that research participants are simply '*depressed, despairing and isolated, with no sense of possibility*' (p.280). I felt it was important for participants to be seen as human beings living in difficult life circumstances, but I worry that the label disadvantaged caused me to concentrate on those aspects.

Another difficult aspect of data analysis was dealing with the mountains of data produced from the participant observation and interviews. On reflection, I wonder if I could have tackled the analysis differently: should I have persevered with NVivo even though it felt intuitively wrong at that point? As it was, I ended up having to compile an electronic database of the transcripts in order to ensure I had not missed anything, so I

would probably use the program in future but ensure that I started using it during the fieldwork phase rather than after, when the data were so voluminous.

### 9.3 Reflections on emotions engendered by the research

Lee (1993) describes fieldwork as '*difficult and stressful*' (p.121). In this study, the fieldwork was fraught with difficulties of gaining access and maintaining rapport as well as trying to remain an objective researcher working in a community whose cultural norms sometimes differed dramatically from my own.

Kleinmann and Copp (1993) stress that it is vital to discuss and to try to understand the feelings involved with fieldwork and not brush them to one side. They maintain that fieldwork:

*raises serious ... heartfelt questions about one's competence and self-identity, the worth of one's work, the moral responsibilities associated with ... others in the field, the possible consequences – or lack thereof – of one's work, and so on' (p.vii).*

Furthermore, Sterk (1998) argues, '*... every researcher is affected by the work he or she does. One cannot remain neutral or uninvolved*' (p.99).

This study affected me in many ways; some were predictable and some came as a surprise. In anticipating the interviews with residents, I was conscious initially of the contrast between us: I worried about how I, as a female research student with academic qualifications, my own house in a 'nice' part of town, husband with a good job, kids at a 'good' school, holidays, comfortable lifestyle and possibly different values, would fit in. I also worried about what they would think about the topic of my research – would it seem worthwhile to them? How would I explain such a nebulous concept as information? Would they think it was irrelevant? I felt apprehensive about bridging the gap between their culture and my own.

It was crucial to begin to bridge the gap straight away; otherwise the research might not have moved forward in a positive way. I ensured that my clothing was casual, wearing jeans and sweaters most of the time; even so, one of the workers told me I stood out. I chatted casually with residents whenever I went into the centre. If the residents had children with them, I made a fuss over the children. If there were any local news items of interest, I would initiate a conversation around them. I also tried to avoid academic or complicated vocabulary, which I felt would be inappropriate and put up a barrier. As

Liebow (1989) explains, *'I adopted the dress and something of the speech of the people ... as best I could ... I dulled some of the characteristics of my background'* (p.44). And, as Whyte (1943) echoes, *'I tried to make myself pleasant enough so that people would be glad to have me around'* (p.78).

It was very difficult not to be affected by stories I heard of violence, rape, problematic family relationships, poverty and difficult lives. Their stories often emphasised the disparity between their life experiences and my own, but we also shared many common elements: for example, I could empathise with the difficulties of being a parent. However, I was always aware that in sustaining the commonalities, I was downplaying my real self: I felt I was acting a role in some ways. I didn't tell them about what I see as some of the important things in my life, like travel or eating out or university, which I thought might distance them. This might be construed as patronising; it was not intended to be so – I wanted people to think I was an everyday person with no pretensions or privileges. I talked about my family and I talked about Canada. As both my grandparents were coal miners, we could share stories about pit village life. And as our relationships developed, we developed a shared interest in each others' lives, so that I could go in to the centre and ask if someone was feeling better this week, or whether someone else had enjoyed their night out.

I experienced a whole range of emotions, from laughter and tears to anger and disgust. Although I knew that as a researcher I needed to try to be objective and uninvolved, I found it extremely difficult. If people needed help and it was within my ability to help, I could not do nothing. I also felt that my helping, in whatever way possible, allowed me to repay the residents for giving me their time. It also, as Sword (1999) notes, *'lessened the hierarchical nature of my relations with respondents'* (p.274). I felt the power conflict most keenly when I had to ask residents for interviews. Not only did this bring my role to the fore, but also it meant I had to take them out of their comfort zone in the café in order to find a quiet place to talk.

I believe I was accepted by the community and the following short stories illustrates this. About a year into the project I helped out at a children's party in the community centre. When I arrived, Bob, the caretaker asked, *'is that your nice shiny car in the car park?'* I said it was. He suggested I move it, and Joan said I should park in front of her house, opposite the centre, which I did. There were several gangs of youths hanging around outside and a scuffle ensued. Alex went out and I heard him say,

'Nobody touches her car, right? Nobody touches her car' (O58-1). And when Lillian asked me to look after her purse and phone while she went to meet the social worker, I felt that a real measure of trust had been achieved (O67-2).

The research was sometimes emotionally difficult and draining, and it affected me deeply and changed my life. The most distressing aspect of the research was when I went with Sarah to the AGM of the local Domestic Violence Forum, which she had asked me to do to support her. My journal entry from that day reveals my distress and how it affected my feelings about the research. A group of women had acted out a play about their abuse, which was extremely affecting:

*I started crying and just couldn't stop. Sarah was also crying. I felt absolutely terrible. I was crying because I was there with Sarah and supposed to be supporting her. I cried because she had been through all this and so has Helen and so have many many women. I cried because I felt so lucky. I cried because my research suddenly seemed superfluous and superficial compared with real life. I was shaking by the time we came out of the room. And then I started crying again. Sarah said, what is this all about. And I tried to explain how insignificant what I am doing is in the face of what she and others have been through and what they go through daily. I told her I felt I had let her down by being so upset when I was meant to be a support for her. I told her that I felt almost guilty for never knowing what she had been through. She said she was glad I'd never been through it and it was OK to feel the way I felt. We sat down and I was still shaking. Then one of the women from the play came over and asked if I was all right. And then I felt even worse: what was I doing crying when this woman had been through hell and back. I can't explain it. I told her I thought she was really brave, but it sounded so inadequate (O68-2).*

These were life experiences, which – thankfully – I could only imagine, and I was overcome with myriad emotions: sadness for the unfairness and harshness of these women's lives, but a sense relief at my own good fortune. This incident forced me to be acutely aware of the potential for exploiting vulnerable participants in order to further the aims of the research. However, without the knowledge stemming from this kind of insight into people's lives, information providers will be unable to provide the information that disadvantaged communities and people need in ways that are appropriate and effective. Like many other experiences in this project, this difficult day developed my self-knowledge, my knowledge of the community experience and my knowledge of research within a vulnerable community.

The results of the study also raised aspects for further consideration.

#### 9.4 Further issues for reflection

Reflecting on the research experience led to consideration of aspects that could be explored further in future studies. There was not sufficient time in this study to follow every interesting emerging aspect. One of the findings of this research was that participants relied heavily on a number of regeneration workers for help and information. This may not reflect their 'normal' information seeking behaviour as times and circumstances change. It would be interesting and useful to re-visit this group of research participants to discover if their information seeking behaviour has changed since regeneration has ended, along with access to convenient, friendly information sources.

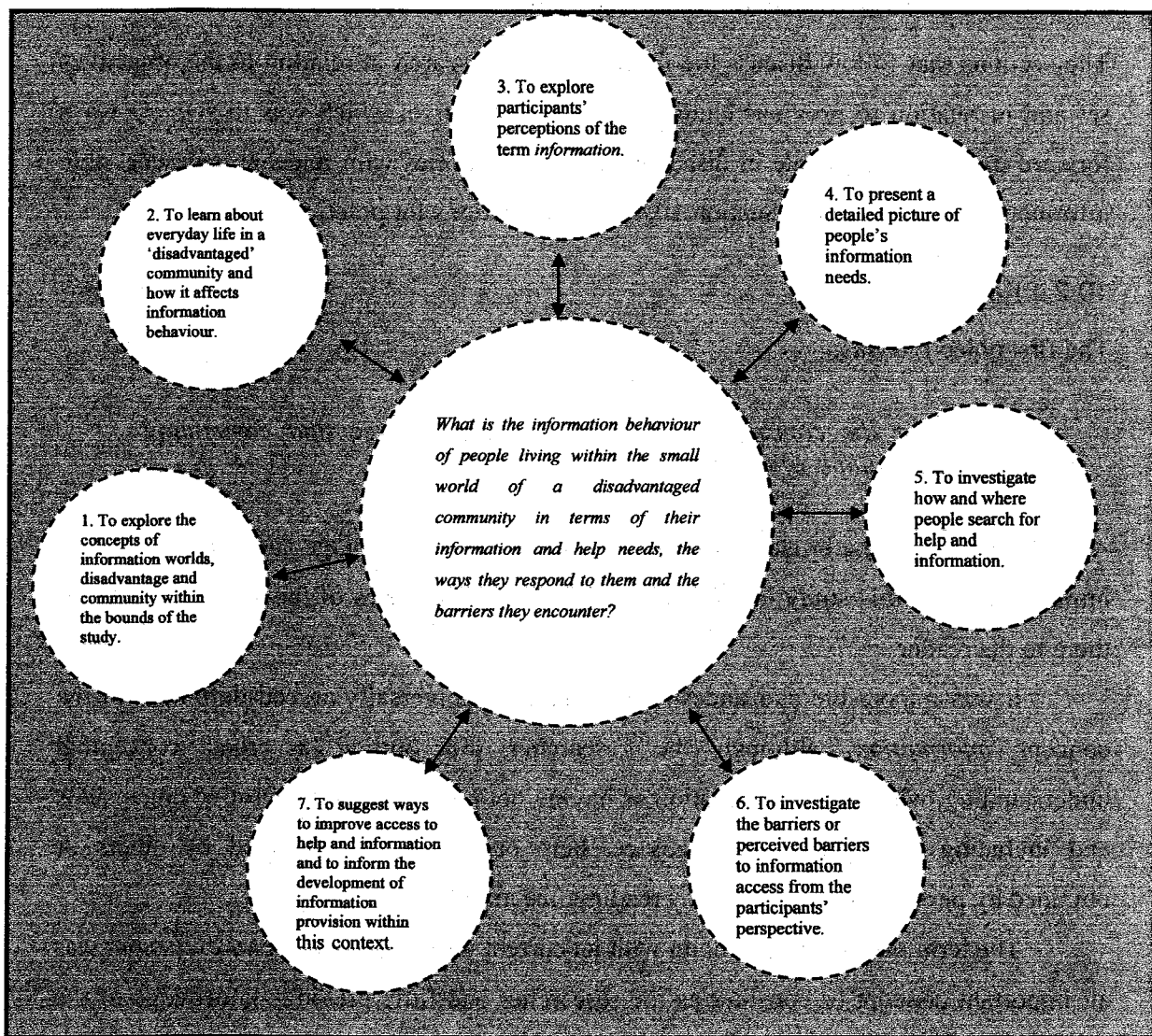
In this project, trust and people skills were revealed as key influences on information behaviour. This aspect has not been studied in depth in LIS, and although the present study contributes to the canon, there is still more research to do. This important issue has implications for how information professionals build trust in their relationships with people to facilitate information seeking and use. Another information source mentioned by many participants in this study was Teletext, as people found it convenient and easy to use. This is another under-researched aspect in LIS. Further research into information provision via Teletext would be informative, perhaps with a view to using it to publicise community facilities, services and information. And finally, it would be interesting and useful to explore more fully the use of informal *information grounds* such as the basic skills group and the school gates, which were useful social networks in this study.

This research project has some limitations as it was undertaken in a particular place at a particular point in time and in a particular set of circumstances; nonetheless, readers may discover many of the findings may be transferable to similar contexts. Following this reflective look at the research journey are the discussion and conclusions of the study.

## 10 Discussion and conclusions

### 10.1 Introduction

From this study, a rich picture of the information worlds of a disadvantaged community has emerged. In this chapter, key aspects of the research, including the aim and objectives, the literature review and the findings, are discussed. Figure 21 illustrates the inter-linking and cyclical way the research objectives link with and guide the research question.



**Figure 21** The research question and the objectives guiding it

This study set out to explore the information worlds of people living in a disadvantaged community, and this chapter shows how the aim was fulfilled and how this study contributes to our knowledge of the subject in terms of new discoveries as well as in the reinforcement of patterns that have been noted in previous research. In order to weave together all aspects of the research, a new model of information behaviour is presented. The researcher then makes recommendations for information provision for a disadvantaged community, and in conclusion, presents an overall summary picture of the research.

## 10.2 Addressing the research objectives

The sections that follow discuss the findings of the research in relation to the objectives set and in relation to previous studies. The final objective, which was to suggest ways forward in providing people in disadvantaged communities with relevant and accessible information, is presented in Section 10.4 as 'Implications for practice'.

### 10.2.1 Key concepts

The first objective was:

*to explore the concepts of information, disadvantage and community within the bounds of the study.*

A consideration of the broad concepts of information, disadvantage and community was important within this study in order to establish the boundaries of the study and convey them to the reader.

It was impossible and undesirable to reach a universally agreed definition of the concept *information*, although the researcher did outline a broad conceptual understanding, which saw information as having both affective and cognitive dimensions and including knowledge, facts, advice, help or news communicated by others or obtained by personal investigation by reading, listening or observing.

The term *disadvantage*, along with its current political label, *social exclusion*, was an important concept to consider as the researcher had little previous knowledge of the subject area, but felt it was important to gain a theoretical understanding before embarking on the fieldwork phase of the research. In this study, the Indices of Multiple Deprivation were used as a means of measuring disadvantage. The term *disadvantage*,

like its current political term *social exclusion*, is a complex concept imbued with emotional overtones. The research participants in this study detested the label *disadvantage* and found it offensive. I was likewise uncomfortable with the term because of its blanket judgement of a whole group of people regardless of their individuality. Participants were asked for an alternative word, but none was offered.

The concept of *community* was explored to become familiar with sociological aspects of the term within the bounds of the study. Within this study, the community being explored was a *small world*, in which there were accepted norms of behaviour, a common world view, a common language, a resistance to change and key gatekeepers: very much as Cressey (1932) described in his research, with '*its own ways of acting, talking, and thinking*' (p.31).

Equipped with a conceptual understanding of the key terms used in the study, the researcher began the fieldwork stage of the research.

#### 10.2.2 What was everyday life like in the community?

The second objective was:

*to learn about everyday life in a 'disadvantaged' community and how it affects information behaviour.*

Since context determines information behaviour, an essential first step in this project was to find out about small world lives within the community in order to look at the ways everyday life affected information behaviour.

Everyday life was difficult and often messy owing to the numerous problems affecting people, including poor health, poverty, debt, unemployment, crime and stressful lifestyles, which were compounded by an insular culture and a resulting lack of trust in outsiders. Everyday life problems were inter-connected so that, for example, lack of a job led to poverty, which brought stress and health problems. In this community, people lived for the moment and did not plan ahead, yet they were often creatures of routine: Wednesday morning always meant bacon butties in the community centre. There were other paradoxes: people stated that they disliked bureaucratic rules and regulations and yet ensured that any rules they personally laid down were fiercely enforced. Many described being unable to decipher the complex language of official documents and yet



they were frustrated when some workers used patronising, simple language in communication with them.

Information behaviour was affected by several cultural issues, including negative attitudes to learning, few life ambitions, low self-confidence, poor language and communication skills, and fear of change. Many people had not completed secondary education and did not have the skills needed to look for information, particularly from printed or more formal sources. Many also lacked the self-confidence needed to go outside the community to resolve problems and to communicate with outsiders, who were seen as 'other' and intimidating. Two cultural issues, trust and insularity, affected other lifestyle issues and had huge implications for information behaviour for this group of research participants.

At the time of her writing, Chatman (1983) believed that the examination of trust as a factor in information diffusion was still in its infancy. It seems that little has changed in the interim. Huotari and Chatman (2001) assert that for information behaviour, trust is critical and that *'Members of a particular small world accept information from those they know and can reasonably trust... gaining trust involves some degree of social capital'* (online). This was certainly the case in this research project. Without trust between the research participants and the researcher, the study could not have been carried out successfully; likewise, without trust between the small world of the estate and the wider world, people remain locked out of potentially useful information sources. Fukuyama (1995) also links trust with social capital, which he defines as *'a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society or certain parts of it'* (p.26). People within the community tended to distrust outsiders and lacked inter-personal links to the outside world but there was nevertheless a strong sense of social cohesion and bonding capital within the estate.

This was an extremely insular estate: a place where generations lived out their lives, and a place where outsiders were often seen as threatening and unwelcome until they had proved themselves otherwise. It was stigmatised locally, which in turn reinforced the insularity. Residents were defensive of the estate and proud to live there, with a strong sense of community spirit. The implications of this for information behaviour were clear: people living in this community did not usually step outside of it to look for help and information, except for health or benefit reasons or if the circumstances

were serious. People were attached to their comfort zones and felt out of place in unfamiliar places and with unfamiliar people.

In some ways, the insularity of the estate also worked positively for help and information since there was a culture of everyone looking after their own, and the social networks on the estate were effective in communicating locally important information. People felt it was vital to keep secrets and problems within the community. One of the weaknesses of local networks was that they were sometimes unreliable, and the information was often inadequate or simply incorrect. People preferred to trust a local familiar source that was potentially unreliable over an unfamiliar external source.

After engaging with the research participants in the community centre at length, the researcher gained an in-depth knowledge of the ways people on the estate lived their everyday lives and began to form a picture of their information worlds. One of the first issues needing clarification was the meaning of the term *information* for the participants.

#### 10.2.3 How did participants view the word *information*?

The third objective was:

*to explore participants' perceptions of the term 'information'.*

An understanding of research participants' views of the term *information* was felt to be important in the study. This was not an original objective but was included when it emerged during the period of observation and during initial interviews that many participants viewed the concept narrowly in terms of what was happening on the estate. The participants' perceptions of *information* has important implications for information behaviour and for information provision, and in this context, it appeared to reflect the insular nature of the estate thus casting further light on participants' lives.

As previous attempts to conceptualise the term have shown, *information* can mean all things to all people (Buckland, 1991; Case, 2003). Indeed, Levitan (1980) offers 30 concepts associated with the term. Those participants who offered an interpretation of the term (and several were unable to) tended to view it cognitively, as something they needed to know or find out about, and some believed that information added to their state of knowledge. Several participants associated the term with an affective dimension, and most participants needed help and support to find information, particularly that which

was not based locally. *Information* was often used in narrow terms to indicate what was happening on the estate, i.e., gossip and local news.

As Wilson (1981) suggested, *information* was a troublesome concept indeed for several participants, who responded to the term affectively, describing it as intimidating, frightening and bureaucratic, fearing it to mean intrusions into their private lives. The word *information* presented a semantic barrier, and participants assumed that such 'big words' contained hidden, potentially threatening meanings. People were afraid to divulge personal information to officials as they felt it would result in some un-named but detrimental effect on their lives. This essentially resulted from the lack of trust between the information seeker and the information provider, and from a feeling of lack of power on the information seeker's part.

A few participants associated the term with learning and with learning places, such as the local colleges that several participants attended. However, none associated the term with the public library, and a participant who used the CAB for debt information said she had not thought of what she needed as *information*. There appears to be a gap between what information providers see as information and what this group of people see as information.

The interpretation of the term *information* from the perspective of the person-in-context has not been widely explored in the literature. Shenton (2002) explores the term from the perspective of school children and discovered a range of interpretations that developed as children matured. Similarly, in this research there was a range of interpretations and for some participants it was a commonly understood term whereas for others it was a frightening concept imbued with negative connotations. When the term is not mutually understood, there is opportunity for misunderstanding, and it may even prevent people from accessing the help they need.

As Chatman (1991) also suggested, for the poor, information means everyday information and not something to be sought in reference books. Possibly the labelling of a service as *information* provision needs to change in order to avoid negative perceptions and misunderstandings. Perhaps, as Fairthorne (1965) suggests, '*information and its derivatives are words to avoid*' (p. 10). One of the participants suggested that the word *help* was preferable. Over 20 years ago, Dervin (1983) suggested that '*systems and researchers have been looking at something they call information rather than something users call information*' (p.158); it appears that little has changed in the interim and if we

are to gain a truly user-centred perspective of information behaviour, then we need to begin by exploring their conceptualisations of the term.

Having established a sense of the meanings of the term *information* for the participants, the next step was to discover their specific information and help needs.

#### 10.2.4 What were the information needs of the community?

The fourth objective was:

*to present a detailed picture of people's information needs.*

In this community, information needs were multi-faceted and complex, and associated with coping with everyday life. Many previous studies of everyday information behaviour have stressed the influence of everyday lives on information needs (Childers, 1975; Dervin et al, 1976; Williamson, 1995; Hersberger, 1998; Harris, 2001). Twelve categories of information and help needs emerged, which were everyday coping issues such as health, finances, employment and housing. Most information needs on the estate were cognitive in nature but because of their small world experience many people needed emotional and practical support in order to make the links needed to resolve information problems: a reassuring listening ear or someone to help them make connections and links. Therefore, an additional category of emotional and help support was added. Many on the estate also needed practical help that was not subject specific: they needed help to make phone calls, to complete complex bureaucratic forms or to write letters. This practical aspect has not been emphasised in previous studies. In this study, a community worker stated that information was a luxury on the estate as he believed that basic needs predominated and everything else was a luxury, including information.

Participants' information worlds were geographically and psychologically localised and time-bound, that is, day-to-day issues were of the highest priority. This corresponds with Sonnenwald's (1998) concept of information horizons, which suggests that context and everyday life have a restrictive effect on information seeking.

Participants expressed information needs about many things: getting a job, managing their finances, handling their children and leading healthier lifestyles. Many previous studies have shown similar information needs based around health, finances, housing and family, although the context and circumstances of the needs are different

(Warner, Murray and Palmour, 1973; Childers, 1975; Chen and Hernon, 1982; Pienaar, 1995; Bishop et al, 1999).

There was an acceptance of the status quo and a sense of fatalism, and people did not always view a problem as something to be resolved, but as the way things were; for instance, one man, who was a diabetic, knew he was supposed to follow a strict diet, but in spite of having visited the doctor he knew only vaguely how to go about it and consequently ate foods that were potentially damaging to his health, while saying '*what can I do?*' Problems such as ill-health, abusive relationships, petty crime, debt and drugs were seen as the norm although not necessarily desirable. People felt powerless to effect change. Few studies highlight this aspect; Childers (1975) is an exception. He notes that many poor people do not see their everyday life problems as information needs. Chatman (1992, 1999) maintains that a sense of fatalism meant that her research participants focused on the present rather than the future.

Some information needs were straightforward and easily resolved, such as locating where to buy consumer goods cheaply or where to find out about leisure activities. But even these needs occasionally involved complex and difficult problems: people became entangled in debt situations trying to buy consumer goods on credit and were not always able to resolve these serious problems, which then became compounded. Financial problems often led to stress and health problems. Information and help needs were therefore context-driven, complex and inter-linked. Hersberger (1998) proposes a tentative theory of *coterminous information need sequencing* (p.284) to account for the interlinking nature of information needs, in which sequences of information seeking are determined by an individual's life experience. Dervin and Nilan (1986) and Choo (2000) likewise outline a need for information to be retrieved on the basis of life situations. Hersberger (ibid) further suggests that formal information systems are not equipped to deal with highly individual forms of information needs and seeking.

A picture emerged of information needs, which appeared reasonably straightforward and based on universal aspects of everyday life, such as the need to find a job, to resolve financial problems and to feel safe, but was complicated by their inter-linked nature and by their severity, which made the resolution of complex needs difficult. It was difficult to characterise information needs in general terms, as, given the complexities, they were necessarily unique to each individual. Recognising something was amiss was not problematic for this group of participants; however, unsurprisingly,

they tended not to call this an information need. Resolving those situations was quite often a complex process of help and information seeking, which was often riddled with barriers.

#### 10.2.5 Help and information seeking

The fifth objective was:

*to investigate how and where people search for help and information.*

Research participants tended to use word of mouth (other research also notes this: Chen and Hernon, 1982; Marcella and Baxter, 2001) to find out what they wanted to know. Participants tended to seek information from their realms of personal experience and from people with whom they were comfortable. Several previous studies show similar results (Williamson, 1995; Steinerova, 2000; Niedzwiedzka, 2003). People favoured information sources that were trusted, local, convenient and inter-personal, which resulted in rich use of narrow social networks – including workers as well as family, friends and neighbours. Previous studies share similar findings in relation to family and friends (Chatman, 1985, 1990; Harris and Dewdney, 1994), although the pattern of using easily accessible experts has not previously been reported.

Social networks were an important part of everyday life for most people. People tended to search for information and help passively within their social networks (Chatman, 1986, 1991a; Bates, 1989; Sonnenwald, 1998; Erdelez, 1999; Koser and Pinkerton, 2002), mostly by chatting. There were positive aspects to this: on the estate there was a rich internal web of social networks and there was a strong sense of community cohesion. Mackie et al (2004) conclude that '*the main element in the building of community cohesion is the establishment of networks of trust*'; likewise in this study, trust was a necessary component of information seeking. There was always somebody around to help with problems or to ask for information – friends, family, neighbours and workers. Childers (1975) also mentions this. However, in practice, it did not necessarily work that way: participants did not always use their networks of family and friends, particularly for information that was private or confidential, as they were afraid of gossip being circulated the estate. Another negative aspect was that there were few strong links to external information and help sources. Haythornthwaite (1996) believes that social networks are important mechanisms for information seeking, stating that '*information is*

*an important resource and one that often depends on making and maintaining contact with the right people*' (p.325). However, as Granovetter (1973) argues, effective social links do not necessarily arise from strong relationships or ties; he introduced the concept of *weak ties* to show that, in certain circumstances, more effective links often derived from individuals who frequently did not know each other very well. Granovetter establishes that *weak ties* are often more effective in job searches precisely because in a strong social network, everyone has access to the same information. On the estate, few people moved between various groups communicating new ideas and information. This connects with a second limiting factor: a number of cliques within the estate inhibited information flow. However, residents trusted specific workers on the estate who acted as the 'weak ties' that provided the link between the estate and the outside world.

Because of close links within the community, the community centre was a flourishing information hub, a place where information and help could be obtained either through workers or through general chit-chat among themselves. It was an example of a thriving *information ground* (Fisher, 2004), in which individuals' information needs often emerged through social interaction – chat – with workers and with each other. Several interesting and important aspects emerged from this type of information sharing: it was incidental and opportunistic, arising out of chat, and it took place in a safe and caring environment. Simply by sharing a social environment, participants assimilated information into their daily lives. An example of an information ground within the community centre was the basic skills group, which met twice a week and where participants chatted with the instructor and with each other, sorting out everyday life problems along the way.

Dervin (1976) suggests that people are often unaware of information resources and how to use them. By 'information resources' Dervin means more formal sources, and the present study confirmed this. However, in this study, participants were aware of local, informal, inter-personal information resources and used them as a means of finding information. Participants particularly relied on specific regeneration workers within the community centre, such as the social worker and the community support worker, often turning to them as the first step to resolving problems for several reasons, including convenience and trust. Participants also lacked the information seeking skills, the confidence or the cultural will to resolve problems externally. Expert workers provided information and also acted as information intermediaries for people, making the link

between the estate and external information and help providers. With the cessation of funding for expert workers and the introduction of the Internet in the centre, this aspect may change over time. Several residents used the Web for information seeking with some success, although there were many instances of frustration, owing to a lack of information seeking skills.

Several participants were also themselves information intermediaries who would share important information with others. These individuals were well known locally for their knowledge and for their ability to keep others informed: most of these were women – the estate matriarchs – although a few were men. The information these intermediaries passed on was primarily information about important news on the estate and debt-related information.

There was also a pattern of participants coming to an impasse in their information seeking – they did not look further or they stopped looking for the following reasons: they had no awareness that there was further information available (Harris and Dewdney, 1994, point out a similar phenomenon); they accepted the received information as comprehensive (although from my perspective, their needs often did not appear to have been adequately met; this leads to the question of: what is enough information?) or they faced obstacles or lacked energy to find out more. This happened to a participant who did not resolve a financial problem as she felt exhausted by the difficulties presented during the process.

Participants used media sources such as newspapers, Teletext, TV, leaflets and, to a degree, the Internet for information. The use of Teletext was interesting since it was an unfamiliar information source to the researcher; almost all participants said they used the Teletext for a variety of information purposes – weather, lottery results, news and holidays. Only one respondent referred to magazines and radio as an information source.

In this study, formal information providers were generally perceived to be irrelevant, with the exception of health information providers, the benefits office and, in extremis, the CAB. Respondents were sometimes frustrated when they could not resolve health problems to their satisfaction but did not know the next step to take. There was no awareness of the public library as a useful information source. There was no library presence on the estate, although there were other information resources such as the community centre, the housing office, the child-care workers and the regeneration team. Poston-Anderson and Edwards (1993) also conclude that libraries are irrelevant to their



research participants, albeit within a different context: that of teenage girls. In general, official agencies such as the police, the library and the city council were not used for resolving problems or seeking help as they were off the estate, were formal, bureaucratic, unfamiliar and not trusted. As one of the participants revealed,

*I had confidence within my own people, my own class, that sort of thing, but going to people I didn't know, professionals ... terrified. (K12/13)*

People wanted convenient, accessible information sources (Williamson, 1995; Blake, 1998), which generally meant on the estate.

Within the community, some research participants were more proactive and self-confident in seeking help and information than others. Proactive individuals were often the ones who had links with outside agencies for college or for job training. One of these had sought information from the CAB and had then passed on the information to others. Another had opened a bank account and researched the process of purchasing his ex-council house. There appeared to be a link between confidence and learning and successful information seeking. If residents did not have the confidence to access help or information from 'experts', they remained tied into advice from friends and family, which was possibly erroneous or incomplete.

In spite of the heavy use of inter-personal networks to find help and information, three people spoke of resolving problems alone. They might have been constrained by their limited information networks and unable to find local solutions, or they might have felt it a weakness to ask for help. This aspect of information behaviour is another that has received little attention in previous studies.

Participants' local social networks were well-used for information seeking and often rich in the kind of local information people needed. However, because of the limitations of these networks, the problem of incomplete or erroneous information remained. Expert workers on the estate provided a link with external information providers. Lack of information seeking skills, low self-confidence, lack of trust and narrow social networks were among many factors which impeded access to external information sources for this group of people. A more detailed exploration of these barriers follows.

### 10.2.6 Barriers to information access

The sixth objective was:

*to investigate the barriers or perceived barriers to information access from the participants' perspective.*

The intent was to seek a person-centred perspective regarding barriers to access, rather than an institutional or systems-based viewpoint. Much like information needs, the barriers to resolving them were complex, inter-linked and inter-dependent. Two main types of barrier emerged from the findings: small world barriers, such as lack of confidence and trust, and formal barriers, perceived to be emanating from institutions, such as formal language and bureaucracy.

Three categories of small world barrier emerged from the findings: language and communication difficulties, insularity and (the resulting) lack of trust. Language and communication barriers included an inability to articulate problems, which might have been a reason participants often reached an impasse in their searches for information. Furthermore, poor literacy levels within the community were an obvious difficulty: written information was thought too complex and, for many, impossible to decipher, whether it was government initiated correspondence or information leaflets from the doctor's office. Many people voiced concern over their inability to access written information and found it frustrating and humiliating. A major semantic barrier was the word *information* itself, which many found to be threatening (see also Section 10.2.3). The implications of this are clear but hardly original: written communication should be in plain English.

Insularity was a significant barrier: people lived out their everyday lives on the estate and preferred information to be available locally. They did not have the self-confidence to leave their comfort zones to access information and help. Agada (1999) points out a similar phenomenon, suggesting that trust and insularity were key barriers to information access. Mistrust of the external environment is also noted in Chatman and Pendleton's (1995) work. In the present study, anyone from outside the estate was seen initially as a stranger or a foreigner, and not to be trusted.

Trust was a characteristic of the insular nature of the community and a vital component in resolving help and information needs, as participants preferred to resolve their problems in a trusting environment. As previously discussed, trust was dependent on

time and familiarity and on the inter-personal skills of the information provider and was one of the main barriers to accessing help and information. Mackie et al's (2004) study into community cohesion within a community in the north of England similarly concludes that, for their research participants *'the most trusted elements were family, friends and locality. Least trusted were agencies, faith and other communities'* (p.6).

Another small world barrier linked with insularity was the cliques on the estate. Although social networks usually facilitated the flow of information, they could also impede it, since people from one clique would not pass on information to another. Within such a small community, any obstacles to information flow caused problems. Many people avoided the community centre – a rich source of information – because of the cliques. Perhaps this is where external, impartial information providers have a role to play, although persuading residents to leave the community in order to access information is another problem highlighted by this research.

A further barrier to participants' expressing information and help needs was the fear of reprisals. People did not always feel they could express their needs for help in, for example, crime situations, as they were worried about negative repercussions within the community; it was safer to turn a blind eye than to be seen as a 'grass'.

Another overarching barrier faced by participants was the tone of information access via formal providers. This was not necessarily based on participants' personal experience but on cultural mores. Many disliked the formality of institutions and saw the issue as class-based. People felt patronised and inferior, and as one woman explained, although she felt confident with her 'own people', she was out of her depth in other environments. Formal dress was also a barrier as, again, participants felt inferior and alienated. Participants were also uncomfortable disclosing personal confidential information as they feared unnamed repercussions from 'them'. An example of this was the young mum who, although visiting the community centre daily, refused to take her son to the crèche there as doing so involved completing forms and she did not want to divulge any personal information. This fear of authority was a barrier for many who would not choose to obtain information from institutional sources because of their discomfort.

As a way of ascertaining how participants preferred to access information, the researcher asked them to describe the ideal characteristics of an information source. One of these was knowledgeability, but the findings showed this was less important than inter-

personal skills. This was demonstrated within the community centre: the manager was a well-qualified information professional but people found her patronising, lacking in empathy and lacking time to help; therefore, she was not a well-used information source for many. Her lack of appropriate people skills impeded information access. Previous studies highlight the preferred characteristics of information sources, including credibility (Chen and Hernon, 1982; Dervin, 1976; Harris, 1988), trust (Chatman, 1985, 1990; Harris and Dewdney, 1994), safeness of environment (Chatman, 1990), convenience (Fisher et al, 2005), supportiveness (Chatman, 1992; Fisher et al, 2005), reliability and usefulness (Chatman and Pendleton, 1995), availability (Warner, Murray and Palmour, 1973), accessibility (Choo, 2000) and knowledgeability (Krikelas, 1983). In the present study, participants named the same or similar characteristics in terms of the ideal person and the ideal place. However, other characteristics were favoured, such as an ability to communicate with the participants at their level but without patronising them. Confidentiality was a further desirable characteristic, as was the ability to listen, to have a good sense of humour and to be able to make links to find out information. As far as an ideal place for information access was concerned, people wanted locally available information in the community for two reasons: convenience and familiarity. These factors when combined resulted in research participants' feeling more comfortable and more confident about accessing information. Factors that enabled access were predominantly based on the information source's inter-personal skills, such as friendliness, helpfulness, willingness to devote time and to listen, approachability and trust. Participants also preferred information sources to be knowledgeable, convenient and local; however, this was less important than inter-personal skills. In addition, it appeared that those who had experienced learning opportunities and gained a measure of self-confidence and social capital found information seeking to be a relatively straightforward process.

The six objectives described in the previous sections were fulfilled in this study and culminated in an overall rich picture of the information worlds of a disadvantaged community, which depicted the everyday lifestyles of the participants and the ways context impacted information behaviour. The rich picture has been developed into a visual representation of information seeking behaviour in context through the presentation of a new empirically grounded model.

### 10.3 A new model of information behaviour

In order to synthesise the multiple strands of empirical evidence, a new model of information behaviour (Figure 22) was developed that visually explicates the ways information was acquired. The objectives of the project were to explore the participants' small world lives alongside their information needs and seeking, and to consider barriers to information access. In this study, it was evident that the estate culture and the participants' lifestyles had a direct effect on information behaviour: context was all.

A model of information behaviour depicts the steps an individual takes in resolving an information situation. The new model seeks to show that within this specific context, information seeking was a complex messy process replete with pitfalls and obstacles emanating from small world lives. This model is by no means a complete representation of all information seeking behaviour within a disadvantaged community, but moves forward from previous models, many of which are theoretical, by presenting an empirically grounded model in which context is fundamental and barriers are present at all stages of the information acquisition process.

The model is followed by a detailed explanation of its constituent parts; subsequently, a second model depicting a specific information-seeking episode is presented, which shows in greater detail the complex nature of information behaviour of a specific research participant.

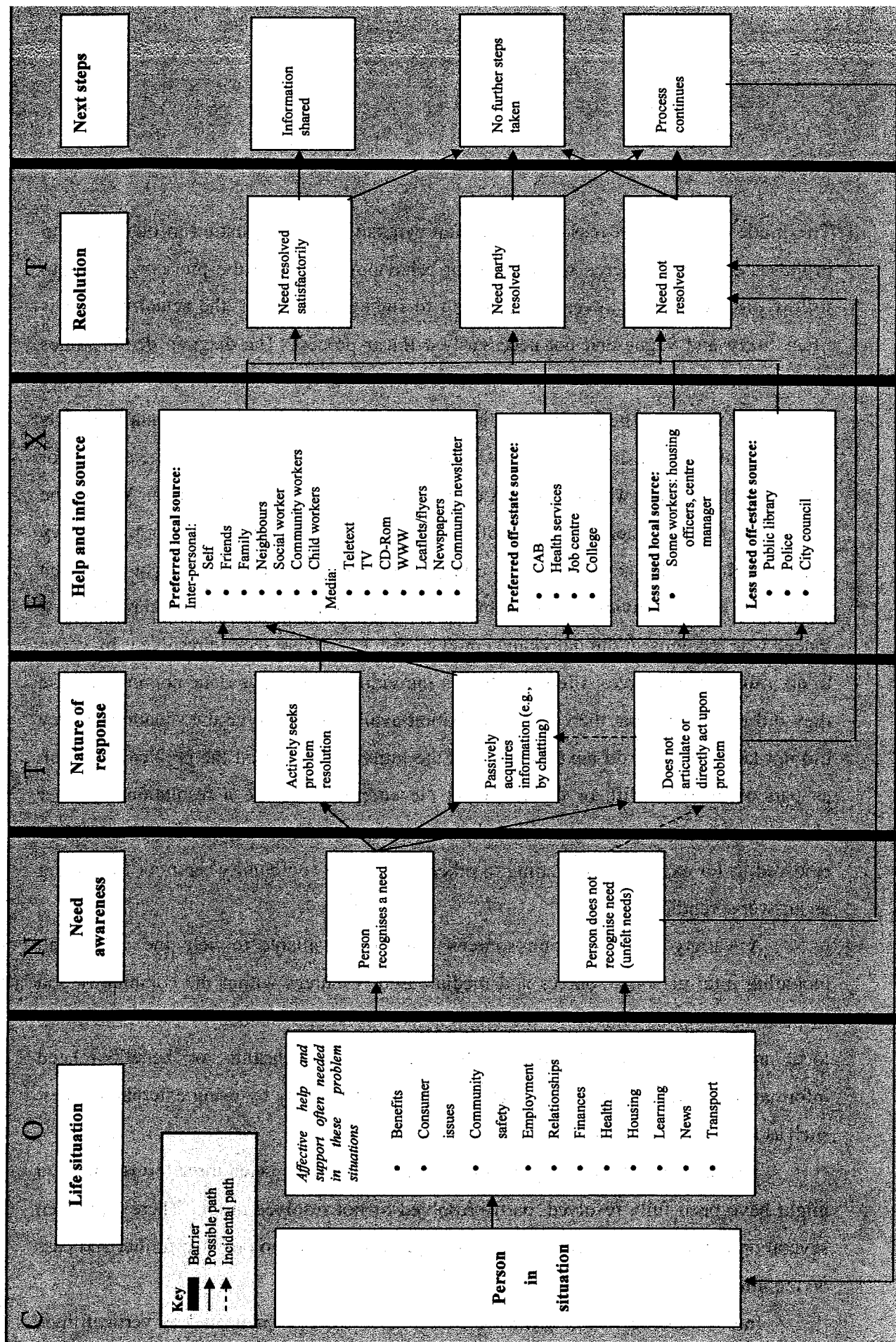


Figure 22 Grounded model of situational process of information behaviour in a disadvantaged community

### 10.3.1 Grounded model of situational process of information acquisition

The model shows a process of information acquisition from situation to outcome and proposes common patterns of information behaviour. Although the process appears to follow discrete stages, traversing from left to right in the model, the actual process is often fuzzy and vague and not necessarily a linear process. The diagram demonstrates that information behaviour stems from everyday life circumstances and is directly affected by context. The small world in which an individual lives fundamentally affects the information acquisition process. An everyday life situation may provoke a need for help and information, which may be a cognitive or an affective need, or both. Within the group of research participants it was often difficult for some to gain the information they needed without help and support from other people. At this point a need might have been recognised by the individual or it might not have been seen as an information problem. If a need was recognised, the individual could choose to actively seek to resolve it by going to an information source. Alternatively, the individual might have done nothing because they did not realise that there was information available to resolve the situation or they did not know what to do next. Sometimes the individual accepted the problem situation as part of everyday life or did not have the energy to pursue a resolution. Another alternative at this stage was that the individual responded passively to the problem and resolved it, for example, by chatting to others within the community centre or by finding an answer serendipitously.

A variety of information sources was then available to help the individual, including inter-personal sources and media-based resources within the community and institutional sources outside of the community. Individuals tended to choose familiar, local inter-personal sources unless the need was for health- or benefits-related information or was a serious one that could be resolved only by using external sources, such as the CAB for debt information.

The resolution to the information problem might have taken three forms: the need might have been fully resolved, partly resolved or not resolved at all. There were then several options open: to close or to continue the search, or to go one step further and pass on the information.

Information seekers might have encountered barriers (indicated by vertical thick black lines) at one or more stages of the process. The barriers might have stemmed from

personal aspects such as stress, lack of self-confidence, lack of trust or not knowing where to turn next, or they might have stemmed from institutional barriers such as a lack of time or empathy, location or prejudice. An individual might have recognised a problem and have known where to go to resolve it, but might then have encountered a barrier such as having to leave their comfort zone or having to deal with an unfamiliar person, which might have resulted in the problem not being resolved.

### 10.3.2 Eileen's search for help and information

An example of an information search helps demonstrate the typical complexity of acquiring information (Figure 23) along with its crossroads and loops. Eileen needed help sorting out her late mother's estate (Problem 1a) and resolving the emotional stress caused by her grief (Problem 1b). Her problems had affective and cognitive aspects. Eileen was desperately unhappy about her mother's death, beyond what appeared to be the norm. She was emotionally fragile owing to constant verbal abuse from her husband and trying to help her daughter deal with the aftermath of rape. Her daughter and young grandson lived with Eileen and, in fact, the three of them slept in the same room as Eileen refused to be with her husband. Eileen recognised that she needed help but she did not know how to get it. This was the first barrier she faced (Barrier 1). In Step 1 of help-seeking, she tried to talk to her husband, but he could not understand and had his own problems (Barrier 2) and became angry with Eileen. Her daughter was also unable to help as she was also consumed with her own problems (Barrier 3). Eileen had a brother but she did not want to talk to him, as they were estranged, and she did not intend telling him that their mother had died. Eileen's next step (Step 2) was to turn to the people she knew in the community centre: two community workers. For reasons that were unclear, Eileen did not progress with resolving her problem this way, although she felt that sharing it lessened the burden (Enabler 1). Simultaneously (Step 2), Eileen made contact with her mother's social worker in order to sort out her mother's effects. The social worker explained that because Eileen had no bank account, there could be problems with inheritance, and she also told her that she would find her the telephone number for the bereavement service, *CRUSE*. Eileen did not hear from her mother's social worker again. In her search for resolution of her problems, she then felt stuck (Barrier 4). Eileen's third step was to talk to the social worker in the community centre about resolving the financial aspects of mother's estate, and he did help (Enabler 2), but she was still unable



# C O N T E X T

## Eileen's search for information and help

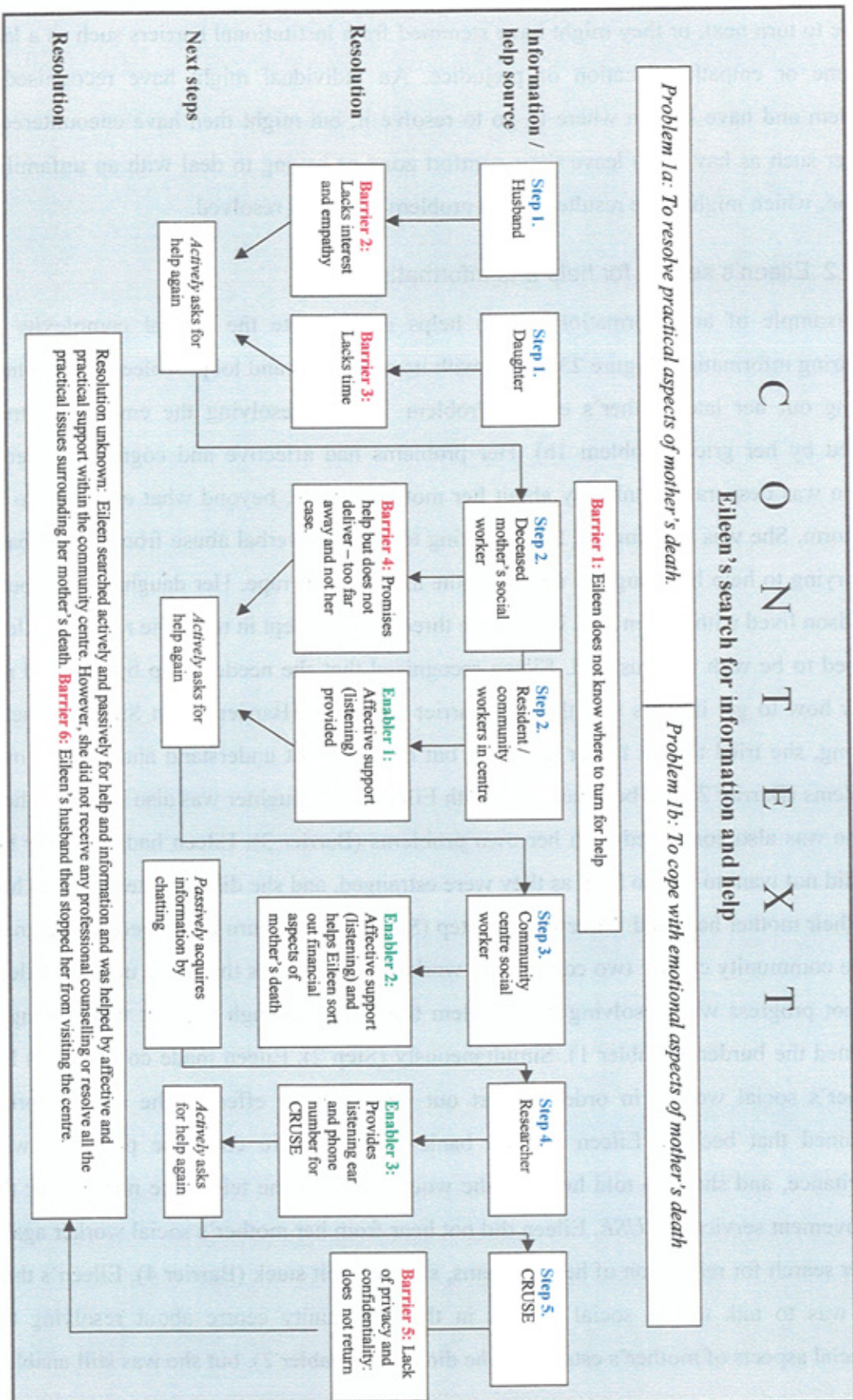


Figure 23 Eileen's search for information and help

to resolve her emotional problems. At that point, I got to know her story (Step 4) when we were chatting in the community centre. She said she did not know how to get help and was feeling desperate. I found the telephone number for the local *CRUSE* for her and Eileen phoned them (Step 5). Eileen also said that chatting with me helped her feel better (Enabler 3). However, when she discovered that she had to go to an open bereavement session in the town centre, Eileen could not cope (Barrier 5), so her search for help floundered and her husband stopped her from visiting the centre (Barrier 6). Several barriers hindered Eileen's search for help and information: her family's lack of interest and time, her lack of self-confidence, her desire for privacy, her fear of being away from the estate, her lack of knowledge about how she could resolve her problem, the unexplained inability of certain community centre workers to help her and her lack of trust in outsiders.

### 10.3.3 Relationship with previous models

Several previous models demonstrate the iterative aspect of information seeking as well as the fact that information seeking does not always follow a linear progression, including Kuhlthau (1999), Marchionini (1999), Kari (2001), Anders (2001) and Shenton (2002). Kuhlthau's earlier (1993a) model also points out the affective dimensions of information seeking, such as feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, which impact on the information process, especially in the early stages. The importance of context in information behaviour is highlighted in several previous models, notably those of Allen (1996), Johnson (1997) and Wilson and Walsh (1996).

Most previous models are based on purposive, active and systematic information seeking within a structured environment such as a school, a university or a profession (Ellis, 1993; Kuhlthau, 1999). There is a need for more models of information behaviour that reflect unstructured methods of information seeking. Perhaps there is a need to move away from the concept of *seeking* information since it implies purposeful activity and move towards *acquiring* information (previously suggested by Erdelez (1999) who refers to *encountering* (p.25) information). The models developed by McKenzie (2002), Bates, (2002) and Niedzwiedzka (2003) incorporate more passive aspects, although Bates presents a theoretical model and Niedzwiedzka's model is situated in a professional environment. McKenzie's model is concerned with everyday life information seeking that is not systematic and involves '*being told*' and '*serendipitous encounters*' (p.26). This is referred to as '*passively acquires information (e.g., chatting)*' in the new model developed from the empirical evidence in this study. McKenzie's model is based on research with a group of pregnant women who were '*on guard, attentively receptive*' (p.37) to information because of their condition; it is not likely that this was the dominant state of being for the group of participants in the present study.

Many previous models are theoretical and identify patterns across multiple instances of information behaviour; they are not empirically or contextually grounded. Wilson (Wilson and Walsh, 1996), Ellis (1993) and Westbrook (1993) have produced theoretical models. Ellis's and Kuhlthau's previous models fail to include the individual's initial recognition that there is an information problem or some type of motivation to

engage in information searching and assume that an information need is recognised. Within this study, a recognised, acknowledged need for information was not always the starting point.

The new model developed from this study is grounded in empirical data and is situation-specific; however, some of the phases of the information acquisition process are similar to previous models. One of the major differences is the identification of barriers at any point in the information acquisition process. Kari (2001) points out that barriers arise at any of the five stages of information action and maintains, '*it is desirable that research done in the future would explicitly study obstructions with every phase of the process, if a truly valid portrayal is sought*' (p.191). Bystrom and Jarvelin's (1995) model refers to task complexity, situational factors and the individual's ambition, education and experience that can impede information seeking in a work-based model. Wilson's (Wilson and Walsh, 1996) model refers to '*intervening variables*' that could be supportive or preventive: psychological, demographic, inter-personal, environmental or source characteristics.

Johnson's (1997) model points out '*source characteristics*' of demographics, experience, salience and beliefs, which he proposed motivated a person to seek information. Allen's (1996) person-in-situation model (p.119) shows how personal and social factors constrain individual or group behaviour. The new model reflects the overarching influence of context on information behaviour at every stage of information acquisition.

Another aspect that differs from previous models lies in the level of detail shown in the model depicting Eileen's search for help and information. This level of detail is necessary to show the complexities of information behaviour that are not apparent in most generic models of information behaviour.

Having explored the information worlds of a disadvantaged community, and presented a rich picture of the participants' lives, their information problems and the ways in which they try to resolve them, culminating in a new model of everyday information behaviour, it seems that there are lessons to be learned. The following section outlines some of the practical implications of the study.

## 10.4 Implications for practice

The final objective of the project was:

*to suggest ways to improve access to help and information and to inform the development of information provision within this context.*

Exploring barriers to information access afforded opportunities to make suggestions for change from a user perspective. Research participants knew clearly what they wanted in an information and help source: locally available information from a friendly, trusted person. In addition, there were aspects that the researcher inferred from observation and from interviews that are included in the list of suggested ways to move forward.

In order to access information to resolve issues in their daily lives, people really need to develop trust in outsiders and in formal institutions. This is a difficult issue as information providers are unable to have a presence in all communities at all times, but a partnership approach combined with an initial investment of staff time within a community could make a difference. Overcoming barriers needs commitment from those who hold the key to information. That makes a complex issue sound easy: it is not. However, tentative small steps can lead to huge leaps in making a difference. Many of the barriers can be overcome by information providers employing staff who have time to develop trust and who have inter-personal qualities such as friendliness and a listening ear to build relationships. It is also vital, if information is to reach those who may need it the most, to work with the community to discover what help and information they need, since people living in disadvantaged communities have localised specific information needs.

The lessons learned from this research are examined more closely below.

### 10.4.1 Value and use inter-personal skills

*What you need is social change and social change can't be brought about just by providing information. You have to reach people first and you have to establish trust and a relationship and you need to change values and aspirations. (CAB manager, W/C14)*

The role of trust in developing relationships that encourage those who are in some way disadvantaged to access information is huge. In order to make a sustained difference to people living 'disadvantaged' lives, inter-personal skills such as listening and taking time are essential to gaining and maintaining trust. Information providers need to use these soft skills to engage with people in their natural environment. The importance of soft skills such as listening, caring and sharing are vital, along with the desire to make a difference, and they cannot be overstated. Engaging with people in disadvantaged circumstances takes time and a warm personality.

Staff attitudes and training are key: research participants needed people they could trust who would try to understand the fabric of their lives. The community support worker summed it up:

*I think, as a community worker, that all the soft things, all the things which aren't measurable, like the first stage things like hello and a smile, and how are you, brings people in; whereas if you move straight into the second stage, can you do this, be involved in that, without having had that first stage, contact if you like, if you haven't had the first stage, well you may as well not bother with the second stage. (Joe, W/JK4)*

Information professionals also need to note that soft skills take on added importance since people whose lives are in some way disadvantaged often need emotional support and caring when looking for and accessing information.

#### 10.4.2 Use the term *information* cautiously

The term *information* is a complex one that should be used perhaps with caution or even avoided when dealing with excluded communities such as the one in the current study. Perhaps, it is our interpretation that needs to change, and as one participant suggested, it may be better to talk in terms of *help* or *problem solving*, and by stating '*If there's anything you need to know, we're here to help you*' (LJ17), particularly when working with people who are insecure and lacking confidence. The term *information* had negative associations and was a frightening word associated with intrusions into privacy and with formal bureaucracy.

#### 10.4.3 Ensure people are equipped with information skills

Information provision, on its own, is not enough. People need support to access it and they need to know how to look for information; they need specific skills. Information seekers in disadvantaged contexts may not necessarily have the formal information-handling skills needed to access information in more traditional formats: they may not know how to read contents pages or indices, they may not understand databases, they may not know how to evaluate and synthesise information, and sometimes they cannot articulate what they need to know. Participants tended to go straight to workers in the community centre who they knew had the expertise to help them, rather than attempting to find out information on their own, because they did not have more formal information seeking skills and they did not want to leave the estate. People need to be aware of the various ways they can access information: many participants, for instance, did not associate the public library with anything other than reading books. The public library should ensure that all its potential members are aware of how libraries can help people access useful and relevant information. However, reaching non-users has always been a problem for libraries.

Perhaps those who provide community information could teach basic information seeking skills to their clients. Information providers have a responsibility not only to provide information but to help people develop the skills to access it.

#### 10.4.4 Start where people are

Information providers need to start valuing and building upon local information sources within small worlds, rather than expecting 'disadvantaged' people to conform to systems with which they are unfamiliar and uncomfortable. The same answer to the question of how to reach people in disadvantaged communities was given repeatedly: in order to start working with disadvantaged people, you have to take what you are offering to them and not expect them to 'come and get it'. The education welfare officer stressed the necessity of reaching out to people and making connections: *'you need somebody ... to make that link. You've got to come and get them and take them'* (W/K17). In fact, it is not quite that simple: in order to really help people you need to first understand and be accepted into their lives, and that takes time and effort. Many participants were reluctant to admit to or

discuss the problems they were experiencing. It took time and effort to get to know them in order to be able to offer help, information and advice.

Ultimately, this amounts to the basic, oft-repeated counsel: '*know your user*' (Varlejs, 1987: 167). Information providers need to really understand some of the difficult barriers that people living within their communities face in accessing information, and act accordingly. All information providers need to build bridges and links with people living in disadvantaged communities, otherwise the rhetoric will amount to nothing. Many information and help agencies, such as social workers, health workers and advice centres, are already doing this by actively working in communities. Public libraries need to work alongside them and carve out a role for themselves if they are to be truly socially inclusive.

#### 10.4.5 Provide a one-stop shop

All participants said that in an ideal situation, information would be available on the estate. In fact, some information was available in the community centre via the regeneration workers, but because of internal frictions on the estate, the centre was used by a relatively small number of people. The youth worker, who had worked on the estate for over 20 years, said that if she had a magic wand, she would develop '*this one-stop shop where different agencies would come in certain times a week ...*' (W/LG3). Public libraries could be involved with such a facility.

Evidence from the Institute for Public Policy Research (2004) suggests that people living in deprived communities have complex and interlinked information needs, which call for '*connected care centres based in the most deprived communities, providing one-stop shop(s)*,' an assertion supported by this study. Instead of expecting people to access existing (complex) models of service delivery, and thus possibly falling through the cracks, it would appear that a single targeted intervention might be more effective. In this way, the inter-linked needs would be satisfied and a person suffering from mental health problems, unemployment and debt – a vicious circle of help needs – would receive a holistic approach to problem resolution.



#### 10.4.6 Do not use purely quantitative ways of measuring success

Measuring success quantitatively has been a common way of judging the success of many regeneration and improvement projects. High numbers often mean high demand and success but may obscure smaller meaningful success stories; small successes can bring huge benefits to individuals as well as to their networks of friends and family. The fact that one participant learned to write his name was an enormous achievement and it gave him the self-confidence to join in with activities he would never have attempted previously. As the basic skills instructor explained:

*You can't really quantify it, you know. But all you're trying to do is build people's confidence and get them to be consistent in turning up and participate really, and it's difficult to measure other than say, well, they turned up. And they were smiling, you know. (W/SJ7)*

Her words are an important lesson.

#### 10.4.7 Provide continuity

The current government culture of short-term funding and short-term initiatives means a lack of continuity in support for 'disadvantaged' estates. Towards the end of the fieldwork in 2003, many of the organisations funded through SRB had reached the end of their funding and were leaving the estate. One of the predominant needs on the estate was for health information, which a community nurse had provided successfully for three years until funding ended. The team that helped people into employment had left, which meant an end to on-estate help with job-searching. The children's computer class had also finished because of funding. As one participant explained, there was a feeling of *everything is going downhill* and when trusted workers left, residents felt abandoned and less able to cope. This obviously affected their way of life, which ultimately influenced their information behaviour. Therefore, more long-term, relevant projects including information centres or one-stop shops should be set up. However, this clearly has major funding implications.

#### 10.4.8 Work in partnership with other information and care providers

It is absolutely crucial that information providers, such as the public library, work together with other information and service providers such as social workers, health and education professionals and child-care workers to provide the best resources available to satisfy personal needs. Many of the key barriers such as distrust of authority figures and lack of self-confidence can be overcome by joined-up thinking and working in partnership with relevant key people. Harris et al (2001) echo this recommendation:

*By working with other providers to understand the specific barriers to service that exist in a community and addressing means by which these barriers might be overcome, library and information service specialists can provide some of the glue necessary to bind service networks together (online).*

Establishing links between the community and agencies that provide help, advice and information is critical, and those working with disadvantaged communities must ensure this happens. Information needs begin with people, not providers, but it is up to the providers to make the links. All efforts to engage people must begin where they are and with their interests. This simple dictum, however, seems to be practised rarely.

#### 10.4.9 Is there a role for libraries?

Is there a role for libraries in helping tackle help and information problems on deprived estates? The community centre manager, a former librarian, felt that library staff could play a vital role in helping people articulate their help or information needs:

*I think the most important thing about a library is the trained worker in the library that can actually get the question that people need sorted, so they know what the question is. And then knows where to find the answer so to act as a gatekeeper to that. That's what a librarian is: a gatekeeper to information. But you've got to have all those skills in terms of finding out what people want and you've got to have the skills of how to find it and you've got to have the skills of being able, when you find it, to assess it and make sure it is the right information, is it in the right format, is it at the right level for the person, and they, the library staff, whether they're professionals or not professionals I really don't care, but it's the library staff who are important' (W/LW12).*

Under this rubric, library professionals would appear to be the ideal people to help those in disadvantaged communities find and use information particularly stressing the continuing importance of the reference interview. However, this perspective does not emphasise the overarching importance of inter-personal skills, which this study has shown may be more essential than professional qualifications. People who are in some way disadvantaged need to know that library professionals can and will be helpful and sensitive regardless of the information request, and that they will not make the individual feel inferior. Library services also need to become better '*attuned to the needs and aspirations of groups and individuals they serve*' (Brown and Ormes, 2000). Again, people skills are vital, but the ability to raise awareness is also important. Many research participants did not know they could get information from a library. Libraries need to promote the service to non-users, preferably through outreach work in the first instance; however, again this has funding implications.

Libraries must also be more flexible in relation to rules: one of the research participants had been an avid library user but had stopped going for 10 years as a result of a ban because of library fines he could not pay. The same man, after being reinstated as a library patron, discovered by chance that he need not have been paying for inter-library loans as he was on long-term benefits. Library staff need to be more aware of and sensitive to these types of situations. The joining rules also deterred participants, who could not provide the paperwork needed; when the librarian allowed them to join without the paperwork, the barrier was removed.

In addition, as stated previously, libraries must take all opportunities available to work in concert with other information and help providers: health professionals, employment services, the CAB, local colleges; libraries should be part of all community partnerships working with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups or communities if they truly want to be accessible to all.

#### 10.4.10 Provide training in Internet use

There is potential in using the Internet as an information source in communities, as it is an egalitarian information source. However, in order to use it effectively, people need search skills and literacy skills, and they need the confidence to overcome their fears of

technology. Within the community, it took time for people to overcome their fears and to recognise the potential of the Web, but it was being used by more people as the fieldwork progressed. As other research projects note (Ellen, 2003; Durrance and Pettigrew, 2001a, 2001b), the Internet is a powerful information source in communities, which needs to be further exploited. Because it is not an inter-personal source, it avoids some of the problems associated with trust and insularity, but is probably best used in concert with human information sources to provide help and support, particularly in disadvantaged environments.

## 10.5 Closing statement

*It's going to take more than money. It's going to take a bit of heart as well and a little bit of time and effort. Half the people who make the rules ... all these people sitting there, they've never lived that kind of life, they don't understand* (Brookes, E., 2004).

The above comment, taken from a *Guardian* article about social exclusion, could equally apply to information provision for excluded communities and it encapsulates one of the main research findings: the importance of inter-personal skills in helping the disadvantaged to resolve help and information problems.

Ultimately, this exploratory research project investigated the information worlds of a group of people living in a disadvantaged community and portrayed the complex stories of their everyday lives, their everyday problems and the ways they tried to resolve them. Although ascertaining the information needs of various communities in society is important in order to be able to provide relevant and helpful information, it is vital first of all to gain a holistic understanding of the lifestyles of the people, as it is context that generates information needs.

It is also vital to determine the most effective ways of ensuring that relevant information reaches the disadvantaged. This study has shown that although there are many barriers that prevent 'disadvantaged' people from accessing the information they want and need, the information is often readily available; however, without a helpful, friendly intermediary to facilitate access (at least initially), it often remains out of reach. In this study, simply providing information, particularly from formal providers or from providers who were not considered trustworthy, was not enough; support was essential to

bridge the gap. The challenge is to look beyond information needs, which often stem from similar basic needs such as health, housing and safety, to examine the context of those needs and to discover the appropriate means of resolving them.

This study contributed to the field of everyday life information seeking and built on previous studies of information behaviour in disadvantaged contexts by,

- providing a first detailed UK study of information behaviour in disadvantaged contexts from an information user perspective,
- combining ethnographic methods including participant observation and episodic narrative interviewing to explore closely the everyday lives of ordinary people and focus on their social settings,
- reinforcing that context and everyday life are integral to information behaviour,
- offering an understanding of the term *information* and its associated barriers from the participants' perspective,
- emphasising the importance of the affective aspects of information behaviour, particularly trust,
- suggesting ways in which barriers may be overcome, and
- offering a new empirically grounded model of information seeking within a context of disadvantage.

The study shows that some of the discoveries made elsewhere are widely applicable, and although the contexts are different, information behaviour is similar. The categories of information needs were broadly similar to those discovered in earlier studies (Dervin et al, 1976; Hersberger, 1998; Spink et al, 1998). Information seeking was also often similar: participants depended on narrow social networks, they distrusted formal information providers and they often needed support to access information. A situation-specific difference in this research was that participants tended to rely on local regeneration workers such as community development workers, youth workers and social workers who worked in the community centre. While this demonstrates the success of a joined-up local approach, regeneration schemes tend to be ephemeral and the successes may likewise be short-lived. It also underlines the importance of convenient, trusted, and friendly access to information. Another difference from previous studies, but which echoes Chatman's (1992) findings, was that in this study, although people said that they always helped each other, this did not always happen in practice owing to participants'

reluctance to admit to or to discuss personal problems because of issues of trust, intimidation and retribution. Some participants noted that they had to resolve problems alone; this aspect of information behaviour is another that has received little attention in previous studies. The barriers to information access are similar to other studies (Childers, 1975; Harris and Dewdney, 1994; Agada, 1999), but the detailed exploration of and emphasis on trust and on soft skills takes this study to a deeper level. Similarly, by inverting the barriers and exploring and highlighting information enablers, this study provided a distinct emphasis. Few previous studies (Harris and Dewdney, 1994; Fisher et al, 2005) emphasise the affective nature of enablers such as emotional support and trust or the preference for helpfulness over knowledgeable, conveniently located information. Chatman (1983) suggested that research into the role of trust in information behaviour was in its infancy, and it remains so: this study contributes towards the development of research exploring affective aspects of information behaviour emphasising the major role of trust in information seeking in this context.

One of the interesting and important new discoveries was the participants' views regarding the concept of information. Information as a concept has been widely explored (Buckland, 1991; Orna, 1999; Capurro and Hjørland, 2003) but rarely from a user perspective. Many participants in this study saw the term as threatening and intrusive: it was a semantic barrier. Their interpretations of the term reflected the insularity of their everyday lives and demonstrated what can happen when information seekers and information providers use different frames of reference and different cognitive maps.

A further contribution of this study is the introduction of a new model of information seeking within the context of disadvantaged community, which seeks to build on previous general information seeking models by presenting an empirically grounded model in which barriers are present throughout the information seeking process.

Having completed this fascinating research project, which was at times emotionally difficult, I feel a real sense of accomplishment and a sense of pleasure at having worked successfully with a group of people who traditionally do not take kindly to 'foreigners.' I hope that they also gained in some way from working with me.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A: Research participant vignettes

### *Alex*

*Alex was in his mid-fifties and was born and raised on the estate. Other research participants considered him knowledgeable and someone to whom they would turn for information or advice. Alex was very wary of strangers and reluctant to disclose anything about his life to people outside of his circle. Many examples of his insularity occurred during the fieldwork. The following story illustrates this: there was a 'comments box' within the community centre café, which Alex felt was a way for him to communicate with the centre manager; he asked someone to write out his comment and he put it in the box. One of the community centre volunteers, a man disliked and distrusted by the community, an outsider recently moved up from London, went over and emptied the box. Alex became apoplectic and marched up and down the café banging on the tables and said that this stranger had no right to know about his life. He said if he had known anyone other than the manager was going to see his comment, he would not have submitted it.*

*In spite of his friendships with local people and his relationship with Lillian, Alex felt alone, as all his family had died. He felt this most acutely at Christmas. There was a local history class one afternoon in December, but Alex was in the café. I asked him why he wasn't in the class. He said, 'It's about churches' (O19-1). I asked, 'don't you like churches?' He replied, 'Too many memories.' I then asked him if he had lost someone. 'Everyone,' he said. He then explained that all his brothers and sisters had died of heart attacks and he was unable to work as he suffered from heart problems. I asked him if he felt lonely. He said he did but that Joe (the community worker) had said that if he needed to talk, then he would arrange something (O19-1). Alex also has arthritis, which was very painful for him at times. Alex was illiterate but had recently learnt how to write his name. This opened doors for Alex as it meant he could sign in to learning sessions in the community centre without someone else having to do it for him. However, he preferred to keep his learning sessions with the basic skills instructor private by using a separate office and not the regular room. Alex's information needs were based around learning, affective support and health. He was probably the most insular research participant.*

### **Anne**

*Anne was 16 and lived with her mother, although she later had a flat of her own. However, she was evicted and returned to her mother's house. Anne was expelled from school at 15 and began training for work at a new local superstore when she was 16. She worked in the café and bakery there for a year but was sacked for theft. Subsequently, she worked as a waitress until she became pregnant and she then quit the job, as the food smells made her feel ill. She tried to find further employment without success. In June 2003, she gave birth to her son, and she and the child's father moved into a flat in a neighbouring community. Anne was friendly and outgoing and did not seem to be as insular as some of the other residents. Her main concern at the time of the interviews was to find a job and to find out about becoming a parent. She had several hobbies, including the bingo and craft sessions at the community centre, and she had previously enjoyed kickboxing but left, as she did not get along with the instructor.*

### **Audrey**

*Audrey was born and raised on the estate, had moved to Scotland during her first marriage, and had moved back after her divorce. Audrey had one son, a teenage boy. Audrey, who with Marion, had worked for two years as a community worker on the estate, was well-regarded within the community. She was formerly warden of the senior's community centre, a position that provided accommodation; however, local council cutbacks brought job redundancy, and Audrey found another house on the estate. Audrey felt it was vitally important to train local people to help local people. She believed she and Marion had done an exceptional job – this view was supported universally within the community – and that short-sighted plans would leave many people without the help she and Marion were able to provide. Audrey's son had experienced horrific bullying from other boys on the estate and was tricked into taking a cocktail of drugs, which resulted in his falling into a coma. He recovered, but Audrey remained vigilant and aware of drug issues on the estate. She said she knew who the drug dealers were, where the drug houses were, and when deliveries were made, and she had reported this to the police; she thought the police were not interested. Audrey was very confident and aware of how to*



*resolve her information needs, which were based around work-related issues, drugs and bullying.*

### **Bob**

*Bob had lived on the estate for over 40 years and his wife was also born and raised there. Bob was in his late fifties and worked full-time as community centre caretaker, subject to SRB funding. Bob and his wife had two sons, one of whom lived on the estate (the other was in prison). Bob was friendly, outgoing and quick-witted. He recently bought his council house as an investment for his retirement, so that he would not have to pay rent during his older years. He thought he could pay off the mortgage before he retired. This was an easy, sensible thing to do, he felt, but his wife was very concerned and it took him years to persuade her. She did not like the idea of borrowing and owing money. Bob felt it was better than paying rent, as the financial costs were similar, but the benefits were more. Bob had been unemployed on and off for about 10 years and had previously worked as a window salesman, but had left as he felt the position compromised his integrity – he was expected to sell products that potential buyers did not necessarily want or need. He also took several government retraining courses, one of which was at the local horticultural college and this led Bob to set up his own business growing and selling plants at local car boot sales. Bob maintained his interest in horticulture and was very knowledgeable. Bob owned his own car. He always referred to me as a ‘foreigner’, even though we got along very well and were at ease with each other.*

### **Carol**

*Carol, in her mid-twenties, had moved onto the estate four years previously to live with her partner, a ‘native’ resident. She had three children, two young boys, aged two and four, who lived with them, and a daughter, aged 10, who lived with her grandparents. Carol’s father was hospitalised following a stroke and she wanted to find out how to help him. Her mother had left the family when Carol was a child, and her aunties and uncles had also ‘disappeared’ (TR-C18). Carol was articulate and bright, but somewhat shy. Carol’s main concerns were for her children – the older boy was misbehaving and Carol felt she needed help. She had taken him to the child psychologist, psychiatrist and health*

visitors and was about to take a parenting class in the community centre. She was also worried about her children's safety as joy-riders and fire-starters were problems locally. Carol was a member of the women's group, which met monthly in the community centre to play bingo, to socialise and occasionally to go on trips. Carol took on the role of secretary of the women's group and was about to embark on a computer course to help her with minute-taking. She believed that computer skills would be useful for her when she eventually looked for work. Carol was also on the residents' committee, although her partner, who did not work, refused to look after the children so that she could not always attend meetings. Through her partner's family, one of the well-known families, Carol felt she was beginning to be accepted on the estate. Carol's main information needs were connected with parenting. However, she needed support to help her realise her potential.

### **Dan**

Dan was in his late 20s and was born and raised on the estate; his mother and brother also lived there. He and his wife had five children ranging from one to nine years, and they lived in a three-bedroom terraced house owned by a housing association. At the time of the interviews, Dan was unemployed, but he later acquired a job at the local bakery on shift work. Dan was confident and articulate and something of a local leader: he had been involved in lobbying the local council for measures to reduce speeding cars on the streets of the estate. He enjoyed fishing and writing poetry, and he contributed some of his poems to illustrate a calendar produced by the basic skills group. Dan used the computer to find out about fishing and the weather. He was very wary of strangers and was not keen to be interviewed initially. He often spoke of finding a better life for his family, although he also said he would never want to move from the estate. If he won the lottery, Dan would buy and extend his current home. He wanted his three sons to join the army in order to have what he considered a good disciplined start to their working lives.

### **Eileen**

Eileen and her husband lived with their youngest daughter and her toddler son. Eileen was in her early 40s and had lived on the estate for over 20 years. She had two other daughters, one of whom lived on the estate. Her husband had been unemployed for

*almost 20 years and, after suffering a stroke five years previously, was partly deaf and epileptic. Eileen's children and grandchildren were the focus of her life and she devoted much of her time and energy to them. The youngest daughter was raped before her son was born, but her father refused to believe it, telling her she imagined it. She found it difficult to become involved in a relationship. The little boy was not a healthy child and was rushed into hospital after losing weight, appearing listless and having fits. Eileen regularly voiced concerns about her grandson's health, but the mother rarely took him to the doctor as the family did not trust doctors. She also refused to take her toddler to the playgroup saying, 'they want you to fill in forms and find out all about you.'*

*Eileen's mother died shortly before I first met her. She was unable to deal with her grief and did not know where to turn. She became physically and mentally ill – her hair fell out and she said she sometimes could not stop screaming. Her doctor had given her sleeping tablets, but her problems seemed psychologically entrenched. On top of her other worries, she said that she was afraid to love her grandchildren too much, 'as I loved my mam and she died' (O20-3). Eileen also told me that their house was poorly built and damp and she did not know what to do about it.*

### **Gerry**

*Gerry, 56, had lived on the estate for 10 years, having moved there to help his son raise his child. Gerry felt it was cheaper to rent one house between them. Gerry was divorced and in poor physical health: he suffered from diabetes, which he knew meant a strict diet, but which he found difficult. He also had psoriasis, which his local GP was treating, but which had not improved. Like many other research participants, he did not go to the dentist. He also had high blood pressure. Gerry had worked as a building labourer but had been unemployed since 1979 (O29-2) because of ill health. Although he was intelligent and quite articulate, he appeared to lack knowledge about his health problems. In one instance, he came into the community centre and told me his arm hurt. I asked him to show me, and his arm was purple, so badly bruised that you could see the blood under the skin. I was concerned, but because of my researcher role, I was briefly unsure how to tackle the problem. Common sense prevailed and I asked two of the staff to look at his arm. They were also alarmed and took him to the hospital, where the*

*diagnosis was of a rupture, which demanded complete immobility of his arm for several months.*

*Gerry was an avid reader of science fiction, horror and fantasy but could not afford to buy new books and at the start of the fieldwork, he was banned from the library, so he bought books from car boot sales and second hand stalls. He had many interests, including coin collecting, stone bottle collecting, local history, reading and medals. He was very knowledgeable on the topics of his interest. He enjoyed telling stories of his life as a youngster. After the death of the residents' community partnership chair, Gerry was co-opted as chair. He found this scary and remarked, 'I've never been on a committee before, never mind run one' (O4-2). Gerry needed to find to how to chair a committee and be involved in decision-making.*

### **Janet**

*Janet was 39 and had recently moved on the estate, having lived in London to be close to her ex-husband for the sake of their son, who was 10 at the time. Janet also had an older son in his early 20s whose partner had recently had a baby. The older son did not live on the estate. Janet lived in a housing association flat with her son, who attended the local comprehensive school. Janet has had some discipline problems with him over petty theft. Janet lived opposite the community centre and a resident invited her to come over. She joined the gym and began volunteering as a cook in the kitchen. Janet wanted to improve her situation in life and aspired to university. She did not want to end up in a dead-end job and thought she would enjoy working with older people in the community. Janet was bright, articulate and friendly. She did the CLAIT (Computer Literacy and Information Technology) course at the community centre and one of the local community workers encouraged and supported her. She was comfortable using computers. When I last spoke to Janet, she was studying GCSE English at the local college and volunteering at the youth group on the estate. Her information needs were connected with improving her life situation through education, and she needed support to achieve this aim.*

## **Jim**

*Jim was in his mid-thirties and was born and raised on the estate. He moved away from the estate when he married but moved back in 2002 to help look after his mother and for accommodation after his divorce. He married again the same year, and although he and his second wife have now separated, he stayed on the estate. Jim was articulate, confident and bright. Jim had health problems, including sleep apnoea. He also had mental health problems arising from his earlier involvement in drugs, which had resulted in having a gun held to his head and subsequent imprisonment. Because of his mental health, Jim had not been in work for many years although he had taken college courses in communication. He aspired to university, and he believed that education would help him to improve his life. He wanted to be able to help young people who were experiencing similar problems to his own during his younger days, as he believed that young people would be more willing to learn from someone who had been in their shoes. Jim was aware of his rights and said when he was 'signed off the sick', he went to the CAB 'because I knew that was my rights and I could' (SB21). Jim was familiar with the way the 'system' worked. Jim's wife was taking an 'Access to Highers' course at the local college and had been accepted to study social work at the local university. This had motivated Jim to want similar success for himself, although during the fieldwork period, he vacillated between being confident that he could do it, to completely lacking in confidence at being able to improve his life in any way. Jim enjoyed recounting stories of his achievements at college, perhaps to impress me. He seemed to be genuinely keen to make more of his life by, for example, improving his spelling and grammar by reading the sub-titles on the TV rather than simply listening. In 2004, Jim found part-time work as a security guard, which improved his self-esteem.*

## **Joan**

*Joan was in her late thirties and had three sons ages 16, 13 and 2. She lived with her partner. Joan had lived on the estate her whole life. She had health problems, including lung cancer, depression and high blood pressure. Her youngest son had health problems, which affected his ability to digest food, and he had specific dietary requirements that were not subsidised through the NHS. Joan spent a lot of time at the hospital with him.*

*Her middle son had ADHD and discipline problems at school. Her oldest son was expelled from school at 15 and had been on a youth training scheme since he turned 16, for which he was paid. Joan had two jobs during the fieldwork time: she initially worked as a cleaner in a pub and later as a waitress in a pizza restaurant. She explained that it was difficult for her to work full-time because she needed to be there for her youngest as she was always afraid that something would happen to him when she was not there. Debt was also a problem for Joan, 'Bloody debt? I've got hoards of debt' (JO9/10) although she was slowly paying it off. Joan moved house twice during the research time, first on the estate, and later, as explained previously, off the estate when the middle son was found molesting a younger boy. Joan's information needs included health issues, finances, parenting and relationships.*

### **John**

*John was in his mid-thirties and had lived on the estate for approximately 15 years. He had a 13-year-old daughter who attended the local secondary school. John was in reasonable health, apart from smoking and weight problems. He had not worked for many years because of looking after his daughter, but he did painting and decorating and electrical repairs 'on the side' for extra income. John had taken training for the new local superstore and had worked there for several months but decided he was financially better off receiving benefits. John's main interests were photography, local history and genealogy. He attended the local history class until it ended. His girlfriend bought him a digital camera and he used it regularly both for personal interest and for the community centre. John taught himself photographic skills and he used the computers in the community centre to research his family tree and to work with digital images. He was also a participant in the basic skills class, contributing stories and images to their publications. John enjoyed writing stories, and he contributed a story he had written about his childhood to a reminiscence pamphlet created by the basicsSkills group. Since the local library visit, John used the facilities to research his family tree and to take out videos for his daughter. John was very wary about revealing personal information. Trust was inextricably linked with confidentiality and privacy in his mind: '(Trust) it's got to be*

*a big issue, aye. I think it's just the way I am, I think. You just keep yourself to yourself, you know, keep your cards close to your chest' (JY4-2).*

### ***June***

*June was in her mid-fifties and had lived on the estate for over 30 years. She was a widow and had seven children, four of whom lived on the estate. June was active within the community and worked as a volunteer cook in the community centre kitchen until she had to leave because of theft allegations. She had helped as a volunteer at the previous community house. June also helped pack parcels for needy children within the community at Christmas. She was a powerful force on the estate and was both respected and feared by many people. There were tacitly understood reasons for this, but as an 'outsider' I never learned them fully. Key informants told me that many estate residents would not use the community centre because of June's presence. June lived alone after her youngest daughter moved out to live with her boyfriend. June joined in many of the activities in the centre: she belonged to the walking group, she went to the local history class and the basic skills class, and she joined the bingo sessions and the craft activities. However, there was always a sense that an element of control was involved. June occasionally went to the women's group. She, along with two others, was active in attempting to start a youth club in the new community centre. June began to use the computers during the basic skills class but she did not use them for any information seeking outside of that experience. Many local residents approached June for information about a variety of topics. She and her family had to leave the estate after one of her grandsons was suspected of 'interfering' with a younger boy. A social worker told me that as an information intermediary and community volunteer, she would be missed.*

### ***Krissy***

*Krissy was in her late 20s and had lived on the estate for 10 years. She and her husband had a young son, and Krissy had three daughters from her previous marriage. Krissy was articulate and confident. She was working towards NVQ Level 3 in child-care and was completing the practical experience in the community centre crèche. For Krissy, studying for the NVQ, and, in particular working with the children's worker, had increased her*

confidence remarkably. She said that if I had asked to talk to her a year previously, she would not have agreed. When I asked her why she felt that, she replied that she would have felt awkward and inadequate compared with what she perceived me to be, and that she thought I would ask things she wasn't prepared to tell me about. On the day of the interview, Krissy had come with two friends and I asked if she thought they would let me interview them. She went to ask them and they both declined. Krissy said they too would have been uncomfortable with what they felt I represented and would not have wanted to divulge personal details about themselves. Other than working in the crèche, Krissy did not use the community centre. She said she felt there were too many cliques, the management focused too much on fund-raising and had no time to help people, and she felt intimidated. Her information needs were focused on her education and on parenting.

### **Lesley**

Lesley was in her late 20s and was born and raised on the estate. She was married to a man from the estate, and they had two children. Although she and her husband were born on the 'bottom' estate, they now lived on the 'top' estate. Locally, the bottom estate was more desirable. Lesley was confident, articulate and open. She realised that her love of reading made her different within her community: 'if they see us reading a book, they'll be thinking, who does she think she is' (LB10), and, her husband could not understand it. This did not seem to prevent her from reading. She was one of few who openly acknowledged that her numeracy skills were weak, and she sought to overcome this by taking a basic skills class. Lesley had a positive attitude towards education, and through 'Access to Highers' had begun a degree course in community work at the local university. She told me there were many difficulties: her family and friends were unsupportive and derisive, and her peers at the university were disdainful when they discovered where she lived. Lesley volunteered in the community centre helping the youth worker, and she had previously been volunteer leader for the walking group and worked as a volunteer in the community centre office. During the interview, Lesley mentioned helping other people on the estate by passing on useful information, particularly about debt-related problems. Lesley had experienced major debt problems: 'We were in a mess at the time. I don't mind telling you, I was in a lot of debt' (LB10/11).



### **Lillian**

*Lillian was in her mid-fifties and had always lived on the estate, along with several members of her family including her mother, her sister, her son and a nephew. She lived with her partner, although towards the end of the fieldwork they were having relationship difficulties. Lillian had two children and three grandchildren. Her daughter and grandchildren lived in the east of the county and Lillian went there regularly to baby-sit. Lillian had not worked for many years because of ill-health: she had chronic asthma, high blood pressure and joint problems – she walked with a stick. She had worked as a carer until 1969 when she hurt her back and had been on benefits since. Lillian was very anxious about my role and the fact that I was trying to find out about 'information'. Although she was eventually comfortable around me, it took close to 18 months to reach that point. Lillian told many stories about problems she had had with catalogue companies, with consumer goods and with mail order video companies. Lillian took part in the local history courses offered at the community centre and was a member of the walking group. During my interview with Lillian, she said she was terrified of computers, but several months later she proudly showed me a display she had helped to create using her computer skills. Lillian's main information needs were with everyday coping skills and with resolving consumer issues and debts.*

### **Margaret**

*Margaret was in her late 20s and married. Family was important to Margaret, and she and her husband had five children ranging from a baby to a 10 year old – the four boys shared a room with two sets of bunk beds and their daughter had a room of her own. Margaret often spoke about the crowded living conditions in their home and said the boys' furniture was falling apart, but they could not afford new. She and her family lived a hand-to-mouth existence and her husband often caught rabbits in the local woods for dinner. Margaret's mother died when she was eight. She told me that she arrived home from school one day to an empty house: her mother had died and her father had abandoned her and her siblings. One of Margaret's aunts took her in and looked after her. Her father quickly remarried but his new wife did not want his children. Margaret said she has never been able to forgive her father and if she ever sees him, she walks past*

*without acknowledging him. Margaret did not have any time for any hobbies, as she was busy with her family. She had never used a computer and felt she had no time to learn. She was very concerned about her second eldest boy, who was kept back a year at school as he was disruptive and anti-social. She did not know what to do to help him.*

### **Marion**

*Marion, like Audrey, was a community worker for two years, funded through SRB. At the time of the interviews, she had six months of employment remaining before funding expired. Marion was born on the estate but had recently re-married and moved away. She was confident, friendly and open. She was the only resident interviewee who said I could ask her anything (O3-1). Marion was in her late 40s. She had completed several courses: Community Workers Course, Basic Hygiene and First Aid. She had four children: three sons who lived elsewhere in the county and a daughter, who lived on the estate and was pregnant. Marion had two brothers who also lived on the estate. Marion was defensive of the estate and resentful about what she described as money-wasting in the number of highly paid professionals funded through SRB. Marion and Audrey both worked and lived on the estate and consequently presented an illuminating portrait of estate life. Marion told many stories of difficult lives: drug problems – there was a funeral the day of the interview for a young man who had died of an overdose; there were problems with homelessness and poverty – a young mum was evicted and had to rely on the community to help her, and she was abused by a group of men; and there were huge problems with debt on the estate. Marion had also faced difficulties in her own family: she described having no money to feed her children and helping her daughter recover from rape. Part of Marion's role as a community worker was to help people find information and she felt this role was both important and necessary. Word of mouth from a trusted source, Marion felt, was vital for information dissemination. She and Audrey regularly walked around the estate, and residents approached them for help. Marion felt it was important to teach people skills, such as filling in forms or using the phone, in order that they developed the self-confidence and knowledge to do it themselves.*

## **Phil**

*Phil was 20 and was born and raised on the estate. He had a two-year-old son. Phil left school at 15 and worked as a forklift driver until lack of transport forced him to quit. Phil owned and drove a car, although he had not passed his driving test. He wanted to take his test, as he felt it would widen his job opportunities. Phil wanted to work, but could not find a suitable job. He attended the job club in the community centre, but many of the forklift jobs involved travelling long distances and starting early, which he could not manage as the public transport system made it impossible. He considered joining the army, but did not really want to leave his young son. Phil attended a local college studying horticulture but said he was not interested in it, and that he took the course only because it was a requirement of his continuing to receive unemployment benefits. Phil had developed an interest in sign language and had successfully completed the first stage of a signing course; he hoped to continue to become an instructor. Phil seemed keen to learn and was interested in the local history course and in using computers; he used the computers regularly to look for job information. Phil primarily needed information and support to help him to secure a job. In October 2003, Phil and his family were eventually 'run off' the estate.*

## **Sarah**

*Sarah was in her early 40s and from London; she came to live on the estate in 2001 via the women's refuge along with three of her four children. Her eldest daughter stayed in the south to keep her job. During the fieldwork, her eldest son and his partner had a child and moved into a flat on the estate. Sarah's ex-husband had sexually molested her two daughters and this had only recently come to light. Sarah regularly travelled to London to help her elder daughter come to terms with what had happened, and she found it very stressful to be away from her. The younger daughter, aged 12, was experiencing difficulties at home and at school, and Sarah found her increasingly difficult to manage. The daughter bullied local children and truanted, and Sarah felt she was not getting the help she needed to manage the situation. Sarah tried to take her daughter to the child psychologist but she ran away, and Sarah did not know where to turn for help. Her*

*youngest son had ADHD and food allergies. In spite of the stress of her family problems, Sarah had a positive outlook; but she recently took up smoking again as it helped her to cope. Sarah was keen to be involved in the community and worked as a volunteer in the community centre kitchen and kept the accounts there. She was self-taught in bookkeeping. She also became a member of the Community Action Partnership and took up the training offered to help her within that role. Sarah joined the women's refuge committee, as she was keen to give back to the organisation. In spring 2003, Sarah was appointed to a new full-time job within the community centre as volunteer co-ordinator for the estate. Sarah was positive, self-confident and motivated, and her information and help needs centred predominantly on resolving family issues.*

### ***Sharon***

*Sharon was in her early 30s and had recently moved away from the estate, which was a relief for her as it meant an end to harassment and bullying. She was born in the Midlands and had lived in several other places. Sharon had suffered from mental health difficulties, and several years previously had attempted suicide. She had phoned The Samaritans who, she felt, had effectively saved her life. Sharon also spent several months in the women's refuge away from her abusive former husband. She moved onto the estate from the refuge. Sharon had three sons, the oldest of whom was 12 years old. She had been unhappy living on the estate and had locked the front door and closed all the curtains so she could shut the estate out. Sharon had one friend who lived locally but she felt could not help her, as she had her own problems. The only person she felt could help her was the children's worker, who had helped her through 'a breakdown a while back' (S14). Through her recent education, Sharon felt she was improving her life; this gave her confidence and a real sense of achievement. A work placement in the community centre office was the final step towards a level 3 GNVQ in Business Studies. With this qualification, Sharon hoped to find employment; she said she would like to work as a receptionist in a veterinary practice. As the receptionist in the community centre, Sharon was involved in helping people access information.*

## Appendix B: Letter of introduction

April 9, 2001

I'm a research student at the University of Northumbria in Newcastle doing a three-year project which started last September. Before that I worked as a school librarian and as a teacher. I live in xxxx.

My research looks at ideas about information within a local community. Information of all sorts, as I'm sure you know, is essential in today's complex world, and the government talks much about making all kinds of information available and accessible to everyone.

There are several questions I'd like to explore in your community:

- What kinds of information do you need?
- What kinds of information and information sources do you use currently?
- How do you look for information?
- How does living in a community like yours affect these issues?

I've read a lot in the local paper about the various interesting projects happening on the estate, and because of that, it seems to be a good place to do my research. I intend to come up with a model for how to improve information access for your community.

I've already met Loma, Audrey, Marion and Harry and talked about what I'd like to do. Now I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce myself to you all and to hope you'll support my project in your community.

Susan Hayter

## Appendix C: Interview framework (residents: final version)

As you know, I'm interested in this estate and the people who live here. I'm trying to find out about the kinds of things that you want or need to know about in your day-to-day life and how you go about finding out those things. I'm also interested in the best way for you to find that information. It can be any kind of information - health, kids, housing, jobs, or money - whatever is most important to you.

If you're not comfortable with something I ask and don't want to answer, just say. If you're not sure what I mean, just tell me and I'll try to explain better.

Is it OK with you if I tape the interview? I only want to do it so I can remember your answers. Your name and all your details will be confidential; I'll use a different name for you when I write it up. I'd also like you to read what I write later to tell me if I've got a clear picture. Is that OK?

I'd like to ask you a few questions and if you can, try to give me as many details as possible because I might not be familiar with what you're talking about. I'm trying to find out stories, really, about times when you've needed to find out about something.

1. *Can you think of a time recently when you've needed to find out about something for yourself or somebody else? Can you tell me about it? (Could you tell me what it was you were trying to find out? Where did you go to find out? Why did you choose that place to find it? Did you get what you needed?)*
2. *If you had a problem you needed to sort out, where would you normally go?*
3. *Are there people in this community who you feel really help and support you? (Who? How? Why them?)*
4. *Who do you trust around here? (Why?)*
5. *Are there things you wouldn't want to share with others around here? (Can you think of an example?)*
6. *What about the workers on the estate? Who would you go to? Why?*
7. *What things concern you most in your life? (Perhaps about housing, safety or jobs, but anything really.)*
8. *Do you ever find things out through chatting with people? (Can you tell me how that works? Who's a good person to chat (or gossip) with?)*
9. *What's the best way for you to find out what you need? Why does that work best, do you think?*
10. *If you had a choice about an ideal place or person you might go to for help or information, what would that person or place be like, and where would it be?*
11. *When you hear that word 'information' what do you think?*
12. *How do you keep yourself up-to-date with things that are important to you? (anything /football/benefits/school/health)*

13. *What do you watch on the telly to find out things (like the news or documentary type programmes)? What about Teletext?*
14. *Do you use the Internet? (Is there a reason why not? / Is it helpful to you? How?)*
15. *Have you ever been to anywhere like the CAB for advice or help? (Can you tell me about that?)*
16. *Have you ever used the public library to find out about anything? (Can you tell me about that?)*
17. *I know you use the centre regularly. Do you think of it as a place to find out things? (Do you find out things you need to know or get any help there? If you could get advice or help through the community centre, would you do that?)*
18. *What would make it easier for you to find out about what you needed to know?*
19. *Is there anything you'd like to ask me?*
20. *How do you feel about the interview?*



## Appendix D: Rep grid prompt

[illegible]

## **Appendix E: Interview framework (key workers)**

### **Questions for workers**

1. Tell me about your role on the estate.
2. Are you funded through SRB? (i.e., will you finish next March?)
3. Do residents tell you about their problems or confide in you?
4. Are there typical problems? What might be typical recurring problems?
5. How do you see residents access relevant information? Are there problems around that? (e.g., if you're a source of information and you leave, there will be an information gap)
6. What kind of information is it important to know on the estate?
7. What have been the successes and the failures of regeneration initiative?
8. Social exclusion – perceptions of residents re deprived, disadvantaged, etc.
9. How do you feel about your role? Are you still seen as an outsider?
10. Partnership working – how does it work? is it working?

Appendix F: 'The Main Event' report

# **The Main Event**

**Saturday, October 19, 2002**

## **The Main Event**

### **1. Introduction**

The Main Event, a community conference, took place on Saturday, October 19<sup>th</sup> in the Community Centre on X Road Estate.

As the X Road Regeneration Initiative ends in March 2003, it was felt that residents should have the opportunity to reflect on achievements to date and to voice their concerns about any ongoing or unresolved issues. And, significantly, it was important that residents be reassured that their concerns would be acted upon. The aim of the conference therefore was to draw community members together to discuss issues of ongoing local concern in order for CAP to take those issues forward working with the appropriate service providers.

Community residents were invited to take part in workshops to debate four main issues: health, the environment, crime and youth. Young people were also encouraged to express their points of view about their concerns and what they would like to see on the estate. Crèche facilities were provided for younger children.

The conference began at 10:30am when residents were welcomed by manager, Lorna and Community Development Worker, Joe. Community residents were reminded that their opinions were valuable. All participants were given post-it notes and pens and encouraged to write down or draw their concerns and stick them on giant posters depicting the four main topics. Residents would then go to the first workshop of their choice to further discuss issues of personal or local concern. Each workshop was facilitated by a volunteer helped by a 'scribe' who wrote down residents' concerns.

### **2. The Workshops**

There were two morning workshop sessions, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, although in many cases residents would have discussed their concerns for much longer. Residents could each choose two morning workshops, but were also free to add any comments or suggestions during the afternoon discussion sessions.

The workshops were as follows: *Improving Local Health*, *Combating Crime*, *Improving Your Local Environment* and *Opportunities for Young People* (from both adult and youth perspectives).

#### **2.1 Improving Local Health**

Residents expressed concerns about information provision and support in three main areas: smoking, diet/healthy lifestyle and depression. Residents indicated that they prefer to be able to come to the centre for leaflets and information rather than go into town. It was pointed out that the Online Centre within the community centre has the Internet providing access to unlimited information, including health information. Some residents did not know this and many others felt that the Internet is often intimidating for people to

use. Nobody in the workshop had used the Internet for health information. It was also pointed out that there is currently an 'Introduction to the Internet' course available in the Online Centre.

Many residents said they want to stop smoking but need help and support. Smoking and diet were seen to be linked – some residents were afraid of putting on weight if they stopped smoking. More support and information is needed locally.

Depression and anxiety are 'invisible' but important issues in the community. Some residents find it hard to talk about it and would like confidential access to local support. Concerns were also expressed about the importance of access to free support.

Residents also asked for the centre gym to be available in the evenings and suggested also that provision might be made for women-only sessions.

Residents' written comments about their areas of concern included:

*Weight management classes*

*Diet classes*

*Fitness classes*

*Groups for healthy lifestyle*

*People should be aware of the wide variety of healthy foods now available*

*More information about diets for diabetes and high blood pressure*

*Help with quitting smoking*

*More information*

*Diets and training*

*People are not using the gym in the centre*

*Housing is better but some houses are very cold*

## *2.2 Combating Crime*

This topic provoked heated and passionate discussion among residents. There were several key areas of concern: joy-riding, drugs and alcohol, fireworks, gangs of lads, lack of police presence, fear of reprisals, abandoned trolleys and theft. Cuthbert Avenue was seen to be a 'hotspot' for many unwanted or illegal activities.

Residents' written comments included:

*Police don't seem to do anything.*

*Police should be on patrol all the time, not just when it suits them.*

*More police to walk round the estate.*

*People feel threatened and frightened.*

*Fireworks. Throwing of fireworks.*

*Too much vandalism on the park.*

*People with a prison record still being housed on estates (said this wouldn't happen).*

*Joy-riding i.e. why hasn't anything been done about this problem? It is worse now.*

*Joy-riding will never stop.*

*Time something was done about joy-riders.*

*Something done about car crime.*

*Too many joy-riders.*  
*Time we had speed reducing bumps on Cuthbert Avenue.*  
*Cars on the 'trod.'*  
*Car crime.*  
*Motor bikes.*  
*Motor bikes riding around.*  
*Get rid of drugs on the estate.*  
*Drugs*  
*Gangs of lads hanging about.*  
*Gangs of lads around throwing fireworks.*  
*Gangs drinking alcohol.*  
*Lads drinking in the park.*  
*Youth gangs hanging round streets drinking and high on drugs.*  
*People involved in community groups think they can commit crimes and get away with it.*  
*Trolley theft.*  
*Garden shed theft.*

However, during discussion it emerged that there is currently much unease and unrest about the local housing association, xxxx. The majority of residents were greatly concerned about the lack of positive action by xxxx and many residents felt that xxxx,

- have unfair policies,
- ignore problems,
- favour individuals who are on their football team, even when their behaviour was negative,
- do not enforce the 'three strikes' rule,
- have lost residents' trust,
- bring 'troublesome' people in,
- encourage negative behaviour because of fear of reprisals

Residents were also concerned about the lack of uniformity among housing agencies' policies. For example, next-door neighbours might have different rules to follow, which could lead to problems. Residents would like all tenants' charters to be similar.

Finally there was also a concern that these same issues have been raised many times before, but nothing is ever done about them.

### *2.3 Improving Your Environment*

In both sessions, individuals came prepared with suggestions about what they saw as the main environmental issues requiring attention. The groups put forward possible solutions and actively worked with each other's ideas to continually improve and develop them.

Residents shared many of the same views and concerns. There were several key areas of concern: fly-tipping and rubbish especially in The Cut, general rubbish and litter in the streets, dog mess and dog nuisance, trolley-dumping, play areas, and recycling.

The following are possible solutions suggested by the residents:

### **Fly-tipping and rubbish dumping**

- Supermarkets to offer free home delivery. At the moment you need to spend £20 for this service. A lot of people on benefit will feed their families for much less than this but it may still comprise 3 or 4 heavy bags. The best way to avoid trolleys piling up on the estate is to eliminate the need for them to be brought on to the estate in the first place. The supermarkets would then not have to employ people to trolley hunt. These suggestions could be put to the supermarkets in a letter.
- Clear up existing rubbish and put notices up indicating health hazards and prosecutions involved in fly-tipping
- There are either inadequate services for disposal of large bulk waste, (old furniture, garden rubbish etc) or inadequate information on these services. If the council do not run a collection scheme for such items they should start. If one already exists then it must be advertised more.

### **Street litter and rubbish**

- There is very poor provision for litterbins on the estate. Permanent vandal proof bins should be erected on all streets to encourage people to be responsible with litter.
- See also fly tipping point on collection scheme for bulk items

### **Dog mess and dog nuisance**

- It was suggested that there are not enough facilities at the moment for responsible dog owners. Where dog bins are erected they have been vandalised very quickly. Erection of vandal proof bins should be considered. More notices should be erected to dissuade people from allowing their dogs to foul public areas - pointing out health issues as well as possibility of fines. Some of the wasteland on / around the estate could be enclosed with high fencing to form a dog walking area. Bins could be erected within it.
- The dog warden should make more regular visits to the estate and fines should be handed out to persistent offenders who allow their dogs to roam free.

### **Trolley-Dumping**

- Supermarkets to do free home delivery. At the moment you need to spend £20 for this service. A lot of people on benefit will feed their families for much less than this but it may still comprise 3 or 4 heavy bags. The best way to avoid trolleys

piling up on the estate is to eliminate the need for them to be brought on to the estate in the first place. The supermarkets would not have to employ people to trolley hunt. This suggestion could be put to the supermarkets in a letter.

### **Play areas**

- Before any new works are carried out to the existing park the ground should be properly prepared
- More discussion should be made with local children on what facilities they want.
- The park should be fenced off with some form of security fencing. Local persons could volunteer as park wardens locking / unlocking the park mornings and evenings. The gates should be 'dog proofed'.
- A level area should be made for older children's ball games – perhaps down The Cut.

### **Recycling scheme**

- An estate recycling scheme has been promised: letters stating that it will be happening in the near future have been received. So far nothing has happened. A recycling scheme with separate collections for paper, clothing etc will not only encourage responsibility, but will also help to alleviate the problem that many people have with overflowing wheelie bins. There are many large families on the estate who find that their wheelie bins are inadequate for day-to-day rubbish - leaving no means of disposing of any extra items.

Residents written comments regarding concerns included the following:

*Rats*

*Loose dogs running around streets*

*Dog dirt all over paths, grass, roads.*

*Dog dirt cleaned up.*

*Dog dirt (many more instances)*

*Dogs fouling*

*Clean up dog dirt*

*Dogs doing their business all over*

*Dogs not on leads – fouling gardens*

*Bins for litter and dog dirt.*

*Council should provide more containers for recycling*

*Different bins for different rubbish for recycling – cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, cans.*

*No litter*

*Clean the streets and grassed areas more often*

*Outside play areas need to be well maintained*

*Time park was sorted out*

*Make the park area a decent place for children and families to play*

*Broken glass on the park – it's unsafe for children.*

*Rubbish to be taken from play areas*



*Rubbish*  
*Rubbish dumping down the street*  
*Glass and cans lying about*  
*Fly tipping on park / cut*  
*Rubbish on cut*  
*Litter – cans, bottle – unsafe for kids*  
*Trolleys (many instances)*  
*If supermarkets did free delivery there would be no trolleys left lying about the streets*  
*People playing football and destroying gardens*

#### *2.4 Opportunities for Young People (Youth/adult point of view)*

One of the residents' major concerns was the lack of kids' activities, particularly on the top estate. A youth club on the top estate specifically aimed at teenagers would be ideal. The 14 – 16 years olds were seen to be a priority group. Residents felt that this age group needed activities provided to keep them out of trouble. Suggestions were: football, netball, karate and judo.

Along side this, because of existing youth provision on the bottom estate for teenagers, the issue of the problematic and stigmatised relationship between the top and the bottom estate was raised. It was felt that because of this, and the fact that the centre was not being used effectively for youth provision, there should be something happening for young people in the centre. Suggestions included a Saturday morning or afternoon youth club – it was felt there was nothing much to do on a Saturday, an evening session for older teens, computer and gym sessions aimed specifically at the youth. Discos and movie nights were also suggested.

Residents were also concerned about the safety of the playing fields because of youth gangs, dangerous rubbish, broken glass, and drugs.

Residents written concerns included:

*Qualified workers.*  
*More resources for kids: activities and opportunities.*  
*More opportunities for young people.*  
*Why isn't there anywhere for older children to go?*  
*Why can't this centre be open on a night so the older ones can have a game of pool or even a coffee and chat? Some residents would be willing to help out.*  
*More for kids.*  
*Teenagers not accommodated in activities in estate: bored – get in trouble.*  
*Entertainment for all ages not just under 13.*  
*More for children*  
*There is nothing much for children on the estate to do.*  
*Nothing much for kids to do.*  
*Youth clubs more often and things sorted out for teenagers.*  
*Young children should be told the dangers of drug addiction, smoking and alcohol.*  
*Safe playing fields.*  
*Nothing for older kids – why can't the centre be open one night a week for them?*

*Better facilities – groups and clubs.*

### *2.5 Opportunities for Young People (children's point of view)*

Interestingly, children, youth and adults shared many of the same concerns. The children were very specific about the kinds of activities they wanted on the estate and they were also concerned about the lack of things for older young people to do. The children were worried about negative things happening on the estate: bikes being stolen, cars being stolen, smashed and burnt out, abandoned trolleys, bad behaviour, and the lack of a safe place to cross the main road. They wanted reassurance that these things would improve.

Comments included:

*Proper football ground*

*A big bike track*

*Bigger bike track*

*Don't want trolleys*

*Safe crossing roads – a tunnel*

*More special events*

*More community days*

*Security in playgrounds – cameras working, bouncer*

*Streets clean so ice-cream man can get round*

*Burnt out cars*

*Library in centre*

*Visits from fire-fighters*

*Something for older young people in the playground*

*Roundabout*

*Witch's hat*

*Bigger better football pitch*

*Swimming pool*

*Football coach (Sunderland FC)*

### **3. Discussion**

Following a delicious buffet lunch prepared by local resident and 'Canny Cook', residents re-convened in the xxxx Room to discuss the morning's workshop sessions and to discuss strategies needed to move things forward.

#### *3.1 Action to be taken*

The key issues from the afternoon round-table discussion are outlined below along with suggestions for possible strategies to resolve the issues.

##### **3.11 Health**

*Key points:*

- Locally available, free information, help and support are vital for the community

- The Internet is an excellent information source, but residents currently lack confidence and would like more help
- Gym hours need to be extended
- Weight management, depression and smoking are key concerns

*Strategy:*

- Regular health counselling on the estate (based at community centre?) which is free and confidential.
- Encourage residents to access Health Information on the Internet

3.12 Crime

*Key points:*

- Residents have unresolved concerns about vandalism, joy-riding, alcohol and drug abuse, responsive policing, trolley theft, fear of reprisals, fireworks, and ineffective cameras.
- Communication with xxxx Housing is seen to be vital, but it is important to be objective.
- Residents need to know clearly how xxxx Housing intend to deal with their concerns.

*Strategy:*

- CAP to engage with xxxx Housing to resolve residents' concerns objectively.
- Need to engage with other relevant bodies to resolve previously unresolved concerns, e.g., police, supermarkets, ?????
- Cameras need to be working

3.13 Environment

*Key points:*

- Dog mess
- Fly tipping – there was confusion about what the council would and wouldn't do
- Trolleys
- Recycling
- Rubbish and street litter
- Play areas

*Strategy:*

- Liaise with Council and xxxx Housing re possibility of dog bins or maintenance programme
- Education programme for residents re health dangers, especially Toxocariasis in young children

- Contact Council to determine local policy in order to provide clear precise information about rubbish collection.
- Contact Council re permanent vandal proof bins.
- Establish with the local council the current status of the recycling scheme.
- Discuss with the Council what provisions could be put in place to resolve the street litter issue.
- Approach local supermarkets to negotiate home delivery terms, especially for the elderly or infirm.

### 3.15 Young People (adult point of view)

#### *Key points:*

- Teenagers need to be involved in activities on the estate
- We need to deal with the disruptive youth who might be in most need of diversion

#### *Strategy:*

- Need to explore current provision: what is available? When? Where? How often? Contact xxxxx City Council and xxxxx County Council.
- Link with other agencies – schools, C.A.s, housing associations, ????????
- Consult with children themselves.
- Form a children's committee

### 3.16 Young People (children's point of view)

#### *Key points:*

- More physical activities – bike track, football pitch and safe playground.
- Football coaching
- Safe crossing of roads
- More special events and community days
- Environmental concerns – clean streets, burnt out cars and fast cars.
- Library

#### *Strategy:*

- Contact traffic department re traffic lights at xxxx Avenue – no audible sound and not enough time to cross.
- Contact library

## 4. Conclusion

The afternoon session concluded with residents completing the evaluation sheets for the day. All participants agreed that the day had been useful in terms of encouraging them to think about different local issues.

Through community discussion and debate, residents identified many issues that were particularly important to them, which they feel need further action

All residents will receive a copy of the report and be invited to make further comments or amendments. The report will be used to help xxxx residents obtain resources and funding to provide services they want and need and to improve the estate in areas of concern. The Manager thanked residents and volunteers for giving up their time in order to make the day so successful.

## Appendix G: Library visit

The library visit was a turning point in attitudes to the library for some residents. In order to reciprocate the help I had received from the community, I organised a visit from the community centre to the local library. One member of the library staff was keen to help and offered to come up to the centre to facilitate further work; however, that did not happen. I talked to the community centre manager about library outreach work in the centre, but she was not prepared to work with the librarian, having worked with him with difficulty in another context (O71-1).

Because of his literacy difficulties, the visit to the library was an unnerving prospect for one participant, but after some persuasion, he came along. Another participant was worried because he had been banned from the library many years earlier for having lost a book. I explained the situation to the staff member and he agreed to let Gerry have a new library card. Gerry was pleased, as he had been unable to use the library for about 10 years.

In order to use the library, residents needed to have library cards. I arranged to be able to collect the application forms from the library and take them up to the community centre for residents to complete, where they were in a familiar environment and where a familiar person – I – could help them. The application forms required applicants to bring an official piece of paper with their name and address on. When I told people this, June asked, *'like what?'* I suggested a rent letter or a bill. She said, *'I only have a rent card with my name on it; it doesn't have an address, and all my bills are included in the rent'* (O71-3). I told her not to worry and that I would sort it out at the library.

On the day of the visit, people were keen to go. The librarian was friendly and approachable. Gerry and John asked about local history. People listened to CDs, were impressed by the selection and price of videos for rental, looked at the photo displays, looked at the fiction and local history sections, and had a group photograph taken. The librarian pointed out the audio books. Alex, who was illiterate, said, *'this is really good'* (O73-6), and seemed comfortable, particularly after he saw someone he knew.

The librarian handed out the new library cards (except for Alex, who did not want one) – without people having had to give official evidence of their names and addresses –

and Gerry said, *'Now I've got this you'll not get me out of here till closing; you'll have to throw me out'* (O73-6). Gerry and John decided to stay in the library and the rest went their own way. Sarah, John's partner, told me the next day that he did not come home from the library until 6 pm as he had been looking at family history information (O74-2).

There was positive feedback from all who had visited the library. I went to each individual and asked them what they thought. Beatrice said, *'I really enjoyed the visit and the library wasn't what I expected. I thought it would just be all books. I'd go back again'* (O74-1). Alex added:

*It was really lovely. I liked everything about it especially Geoff: he was so friendly and helpful. And the guy did my laminating free. There was a good atmosphere. I liked the uniforms.* (O74-1).

It was interesting that he liked the uniforms since most participants had said they did not like formal attire; however, the uniforms at the library consisted of casual blue polo shirts with the library logo and were not threateningly formal.

#### **After the library visit**

After the library visit, John began to visit the library to find out about local history and described the local history section as *'brilliant'*. He also rented videos there for his daughter, as it was considerably cheaper than the video rental shop. He found the staff helpful, particularly the one member who had helped us on the visit, whom he described as *'spot on'* (JY3/4). John said he intended using the library to find out about his family tree:

*I was doing my family tree but they're starting down the library in a few months' time, after Christmas, and I've got my name down for that. I can do the classes down there, you know.* (JY3/4)

He did not go in the end; I do not know why not. Similarly, Gerry became a regular visitor and used the library for video rentals, for borrowing fiction and for looking through the local history archives, which he described as *'great'*. Gerry resented paying for inter-library loans, but he later discovered that as he was on Invalidity Benefits, he did not need to pay for them (O86-2). He changed his mind about library staff, saying later in the research study that, *'they're helpful and friendly'* (O86-2).

Carol was also indirectly influenced by the library visit. Her partner's grandmother, Beatrice, had been on the trip and had talked about the library to Carol. Although Carol had not previously considered going to the library, she said:

*My dad had a stroke six weeks ago and I want to now how to cope with somebody who's had a stroke and afterwards. I said to Harriet, 'cos she mentioned she was going down, I says, oh will you get us a book on strokes ... so I thought well I'm going to have to go down and join so I know exactly how to understand my dad when he gets home. (C15).*

I offered to help Carol by going with her or meeting her there, but she did not take up the offer, and I do not know whether she went of her own volition. Lillian found getting to the library difficult because of her ill health and mobility problems, but she thought it would be '*brilliant*' (SB14) if the library came to the community centre.



## **Appendix H: Data themes**

The data were categorised thematically as follows, with 22 sub-categories and 90 sub-sub categories:

### **1. Everyday small worlds**

- **Insularity**

- Comfort zones
- Community spirit
- Stigma
- Isolation
- Trust
- Outsiders
- Social networks
- The matriarchal influence
- Living for the day

- **Cultural issues**

- Attitudes to learning
- Ambitions and aspirations
- Image and self-confidence
- Jealousy and fear of change
- Attitudes towards officials and bureaucracy
- Attitudes towards rules
- Language and communication
  - an indigenous language
  - literacy
  - patronising language
  - communication
  - semantic barriers

- Everyday problems
  - Finances
  - Employment
  - Health
  - Stressful lifestyles
    - crime
    - violence
    - drugs
    - relationships
    - turbulent emotions

## **2. Information needs**

- General help and support
  - Practical and emotional support
  - Making phone calls
  - Form filling
- Benefits
  - Benefits entitlements
  - Coping on benefits
- Safety
  - Petty crime
  - Children's safety
  - CMTV cameras
  - Domestic violence
  - Drugs
- Consumer issues
  - Best prices
  - Consumer problems
- Employment
  - Preparing for employment

- Employment information
- Family relationships
  - Child welfare
  - Adult relationships
  - Abusive relationships
  - Caring responsibilities
- Finances
  - Savings and banking
  - Debt
- Health
  - Mental and emotional health
  - Physical health
  - The health information days
- Housing
  - Repairs
  - Damp
  - Overcrowding
  - Rent and rates
- Learning
  - Basic skills needs
  - Issues associated with children's schooling
  - General learning needs
- News
  - Estate news
  - Local news
  - National and global news
- Recreation
  - Reading
- Transport

### **3. Information seeking**

- Active/passive
- On the estate
  - Social networks
    - word of mouth
    - residents as information intermediaries
    - self reliance
    - family
    - friends and neighbours
    - workers as information intermediaries
    - other inter-personal information sources
    - reasons for not using workers for information
  - The wider estate community
    - the primary school
  - Technology and media
    - computers and the Internet
      - ◆ regular Internet use
      - ◆ Internet fears
      - ◆ intending to use the Internet
    - paper-based sources
      - ◆ leaflets and flyers
      - ◆ notice boards
      - ◆ the community newsletter
    - media sources
      - ◆ newspapers
      - ◆ regional newspapers
      - ◆ national newspapers
      - ◆ magazines
      - ◆ TV
      - ◆ radio

- ◆ teletext
- ◆ phone use

- **Off estate**

- Benefits office
- Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB)
- Local colleges
- City council
- Health professionals
  - GPs
  - mental health professionals
  - Samaritans
- The job centre
- The police
- The Public Library
  - library users
  - public library non-users
- The women's refuge
- Friends off the estate
- The town centre

#### **4. Barriers to information access**

- **Small world**

- Insularity
  - privacy and confidentiality
  - dislike of bureaucracy and formal institutions
  - self-confidence
  - comfort zones
- Lack of trust
  - fear of outsiders
  - lack of familiarity
- Language and communication

- articulation of needs
  - cliques
  - listening skills
  - literacy and complex language
- Doorstep culture
  - time
  - living for today
- Institutional
  - Bureaucracy
    - formal appearance
    - formal language
    - formal environment
  - Costs
  - Lack of awareness
  - Location
  - Opening hours
  - Patronising attitudes
  - Prejudice
  - Time
- Ideal place
  - Local
- Ideal person
  - Approachability
  - Familiarity
  - Friendliness and helpfulness
  - Knowledgeability, expertise and making links: information intermediaries
  - Down-to-earth nature
  - Sense of humour
  - Supportiveness

## Appendix I: Member-checking

### **The information needs of your community**

My research project with you was to discover:

- the kinds of things you needed to find out about or needed help with in your everyday life,
- how you found that information, and
- where or who you went to in order to find it.

I was also interested in knowing:

- what stopped you from finding information, and
- what helped you to find information?

<b>So, what kinds of things did you need to find out about?</b>
-----------------------------------------------------------------

- Community safety - petty crime and vandalism, women's safety, drugs, joy-riders.
- Employment - finding work, job training.
- Family - activities for kids, parenting, bullying, caring for family, kids' safety, abusive relationships.
- General help - filling in forms, making phone calls.
- Health - mental stress, physical illness, diet, smoking.
- Housing - repairs, rent problems, dampness, overcrowding.
- Learning - reading skills, training, kids' school, hobbies.
- Money issues - how to sort out debts, savings and banking, benefits entitlement, coping on benefit money.
- News - what's happening locally, nationally, globally.

- Hobbies - local history, family trees, fishing, art.
- Shopping - where to find best prices, problems with catalogue shopping, problems with appliances.
- Transport - getting to work, getting around.

<p><b>How did you find out what you wanted to know?</b></p>
-------------------------------------------------------------

- You all thought word of mouth was the best way, but if that did not work, some of you would use the phone.

<p><b>Where did you find out what you wanted to know?</b></p>
---------------------------------------------------------------

- Most of you preferred to find out from people on the estate such as family, friends and neighbours, and some of the workers.
- The Centre was a good place to find out things although you did not trust all the workers.
- Chatting in the street was also a good way to find out things.
- If it was a health problem, then most of you would go to the doctor or other health worker.
- If you couldn't find out from people on the estate, or if you felt it was the last resort, then some of you might go off the estate to somewhere like the CAB if it was a debt problem, or the benefits office for benefits problems.
- Some of you used the Internet to find out things.
- Many of you used Teletext to find information.
- Some of you read the notices and leaflets in the Community Centre to find out things.



- Some of you felt there was nobody to help you and you had to sort out your own problems.
- Most of you did not find official places (like the police or the city council) helpful.
- Most of you would not think about going to the library for information.

<p><b>What things stopped you finding out information?</b></p>
----------------------------------------------------------------

- Many of you did not like bureaucracy as you felt it could be scary. You also said that the way official types dressed (in suits) made you feel they looked down on you.
- Unfamiliar places could be scary and most of you said you preferred information to be available on the estate.
- Forms and letters written in formal language were hard to understand.
- Trust was really important for you and if you didn't trust the person, you wouldn't ask them for information.
- Sometimes you did not know where to go to find the help you needed.

<p><b>What things helped you to find information?</b></p>
-----------------------------------------------------------

The most important thing about finding information was that it was available from a person you could trust. You described that person as someone who:

- would keep information confidential,
- knowledgeable,
- approachable,
- familiar,

- friendly,
- supportive,
- understanding,
- had time for you,
- would listen,
- would speak your language,
- a sense of humour.

Some of you also said it was important to be able to get information straight away and not have to wait.

#### **What next?**

I hope I have managed to describe all of your ideas and comments. It would be really helpful to me if you would let me know if I have got things right, or if there are things that I have missed. Anything you want to say will be anonymous.

You have done so much to help me - thank you. I really couldn't have done any of it without you. 😊

#### **Your comments**

## Appendix J: Participants' responses

### **Your comments**

*Have spoken to a few people about results of your survey and all agree that these are the things that they had agreed on at the time you had spoken to them. Nobody could think of anything that they could add.*

## Appendix J: Participants' responses

### Your comments

Thanks for choc's lovely.  
info needs spot on.

with love

Catherine

X

## Appendix J: Participants' responses

### Sue Hayter

---

From: [redacted]@mail.com>  
 To: <scotthayter@sympatico.ca>  
 Sent: March 23, 2005 9:25 AM  
 Subject: Re: last try!

Sorry kids off school manic here

answer to survey box titled your comments:

[redacted] said

The only comment I have is to thank you for the short time you spent with us in the centre and for the good work you did with us.

[redacted] said

Your approach to people and their problems was genuine and sympathetic. People could understand what you were asking for and related to you easily. You have covered all of what people seemed to require, and people were at ease with you.

[redacted] said

Yes you covered everything that we wanted to know. Thank you

[redacted] said

Your work was very informative, we found out different ways of finding information. It was lovely to have you working on the estate, you were extremely easy to talk to and were genuinely interested in what people wanted and how they were able to access these. Thank You for all the work you put in.

>From: "Sue Hayter" <scotthayter@sympatico.ca>

>To: [redacted]

>Subject: Re: last try!

>Date: Tue, 22 Mar 2005 06:53:57 -0500

>

>Thanks - I know the post has been ridiculous both ways. I sent

>something to UK beginning of Feb and it still hasn't arrived.

>

>Is there any way you can send them by email? Or scan?

>Or fax: 519 747 2106 (not sure what the area code is from UK)

>

>Sue x

>

--  
 No virus found in this incoming message.

Checked by AVG Anti-Virus.

Version: 7.0.308 / Virus Database: 266.7.4 - Release Date: 18/03/2005

## Published papers

# Strategies for gaining access to organisations and informants in qualitative studies

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One of the most fundamental tasks relating to the undertaking of fieldwork for a qualitative research study lies in "gaining access". This involves both securing entry into a particular organisation ensuring that individuals associated with it, such as employees or users, will serve as informants. In the first problem, a range of strategies that may be adopted by the investigator is highlighted in the paper. The methods include using endorsements from "authorities", gradually phasing one's entry into the organisation, offering benefits of some kind to managers in the event of their cooperation, respond to gatekeepers' concerns honestly, demonstrating one's suitability for entry in terms of professional background and experience, and remaining receptive to managers' suggestions for the study. To encourage the cooperation of those associated with the organisation, the researcher may well favour a policy of prolonged engagement, seek to blend in with the community, offer incentives where appropriate and acknowledge openly the value of informants' contributions. These strategies are considered in detail. The article also stresses the importance of gaining the approval of any "third parties" that may be responsible for the welfare of those people whom the researcher has targeted as informants.

**Keywords:** Gaining access, fieldwork, gatekeepers, barriers to research

## 1. Introduction

For many qualitative investigators, one of the most pressing research concerns lies in "gaining access". The researcher's success in this regard will have a significant effect on the nature and quality of the data collected, on the insight into the organisation and its members that the investigator is able to gain, and, ultimately, on the trustworthiness of the findings. Essentially, there are two problems of access that must be tackled. The first is that of securing entry into the organisations in which the fieldwork will be conducted. This is one of the most fundamental tasks hoped for since any gatekeepers who deny the researcher access to their organisations will effectively prevent him or her from approaching all the potential informants with them, unless, of course, there are alternative routes available to the investigator.

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such lack of cooperation may throw into doubt the whole fieldwork element of the project, especially if the particular organisations involved have been targeted for the study on the basis of their unique characteristics. As Burgess notes, "access is a prerequisite; a precondition for the research to be conducted" [1]. The second problem lies in persuading individual informants associated with the organisations to contribute data, usually via focus groups or one-to-one interviews. Such people may include employees and users. This paper considers the tactics that the researcher may implement to tackle each issue.

## 2. Gaining access to organisations

### 2.1. *Tactic one – The "known sponsor approach"*

This term is used by Patton, who believes the strategy to be the most successful method of securing entry in most cases [2]. If, in advance of the fieldwork, project funding has been secured from a reputable organisation, the researcher will be able to cite that body's support in order to establish his or her own credibility and legitimacy when making the first approaches. These may not initially be directed at the organisations in which the researcher wishes to conduct the fieldwork but at a higher level body that exercises overall control over them. Support at this executive level may be critical to the researcher's success in gaining access to the subordinate organisations since, as Stake notes, "individuals often immediately acquiesce if a superior has granted permission" [3]. An arrangement may be reached in which a manager at the executive level contacts the appropriate organisations in advance of the investigator making his or her approaches, and draws attention to the fact that the project has received official approval. If the study is being conducted under the auspices of a learned institution, such as the university where the researcher works, he or she may be able to refer to independent endorsements from as many as three separate parties – this organisation, the funding provider and, of course, the manager who has approved the approach that is to be made to the organisations which it is hoped will actually take part. In all written communications, the researcher may wish to use headed notepaper to emphasise his or her status.

A major drawback of the "known sponsor approach" that may emerge for investigators once they have entered the field must also be recognised, however. As Punch notes, "Researchers may suffer by being continually seen as extensions of their political sponsors within the setting despite their denials to the contrary" [4]. This problem is analogous to that of "obstructive identifications", which was highlighted by Dalton as early as the 1950s [5]. Certainly references to any sponsor can easily exacerbate a danger detected by Walsh, namely that members of the host community are likely to cast the investigator in a particular role, such as "expert" or "critic" [6], whereas he or she may prefer to cultivate a naïveté that is consistent with his or her position as a newcomer or stranger. The investigator may even, of course, ally himself or

himself with a sponsor who, unbeknownst to him or her, is actively disliked by prospective informants and citing the support of this person may stimulate a negative reaction to the research.

### 2.2. *Tactic two – Phased entry*

Initially, organisations targeted by the researcher may be asked to complete simple questionnaire relating to their characteristics. This may actually form part of a wider sampling process, since, if the investigator is employing a purposive sample, it may be necessary to ensure that the organisations ultimately asked participate meet certain criteria. The data collected via the questionnaire may facilitate comparison of the different organisations that have been targeted. This may be useful when the investigator writes the section of the research report devoted to background information about the organisations in which the fieldwork took place. In terms of gaining access, this preliminary contact can serve as an "ice-breaker" and afford the investigator a foothold in the organisations since, when further, more demanding involvement is needed from them through providing access to informal and, perhaps, appropriate documents, the researcher will be able to identify himself as someone whom the organisations already know and have already assisted.

### 2.3. *Tactic three – Reciprocity*

Sharp and Howard believe that entry is best ensured if the investigator agrees to share his or her findings with the collaborating organisations and make available them copies of any papers that emerge from the research activity [7]. Moreover, Bogdan and Biklen suggest that, if such a collaborating organisation is to offer the investigator access to the site, its personnel and users, its managers may feel entitled to some reward from the work [8]. Where the project can be shown to benefit the organisation, this goes some way to fostering the ideal exchange relationship or "reciprocity" identified by Jorgensen [9]. To this end, where appropriate, organisations approached may, even before indicating their willingness to become involved, be provided with a copy of a literature review prepared by the investigator. Although this document will have been produced as part of the research activity itself, its subject matter may be of considerable interest and value to practitioners in the field. The action serves to demonstrate good intentions on the part of the researcher too. Similarly, at an early stage, the investigator may wish to draw the attention of the organisations approached to any further offers he or she may intend to make, such as plans to disseminate the findings of the finished project to organisations that choose to participate. This may be done via papers and at workshops/seminars staged after the analysis of the study data. A comparable policy of reciprocity has been employed by, among others, Pickard, who produced reports and presentations for various committees within the organisations in which her fieldwork took place [10] and Gross, who provided each of the participating organisations with a copy of



her final research report [11]. The researcher should, however, be wary of giving extravagant undertakings. In attempting to gain access to organisations, it is tempting to offer too much and one may regret making rash promises at a later stage in the work.

#### 2.4. *Tactic four – Openness*

Gorman and Clayton [12] and Bogdan and Biklen [13] identify a range of issues which they consider the researcher should be prepared to address honestly in the dialogues with representatives of collaborating institutions in order to gain access. The issues include the reasons for the choice of fieldwork sites, the work that will be undertaken there, the nature and extent of any disruption that will be caused and the procedures for reporting the study's results. Stake draws attention to similar issues, and notes that the researcher should also be ready to discuss the envisaged timescale for the work and any plans that have been made to "anonymise" the data [14]. The latter is likely to be of particular interest if there is any potential for an organisation to be represented adversely in the final report. The researcher must not only be willing to discuss these matters, but should be well prepared, too, for any predictable questions regarding them. In addition, it should be recognised that, in truly qualitative work characterised by an emergent design or indeed in any research in which fieldwork is sustained over a lengthy period, the process of negotiating access may well prove to be an ongoing one since the researcher may be unable to forecast at the outset of the study the demands that he or she is to make on the organisation and its staff.

#### 2.5. *Tactic five – Demonstration of professional suitability*

During discussions involving the professionals with whom he or she comes into contact when making the preliminary approaches, the researcher should be able to demonstrate an awareness of wider professional trends, as well as any more local developments. Membership of appropriate professional associations and references to relevant experience, employment and personal interests can also be critical in ensuring that the researcher is accepted by managers and in breaking down barriers between the two parties. Initially, staff will almost certainly view the investigator as an "outsider". If the researcher wishes to undertake fieldwork in a school, the safety of the youngsters with whom he or she will come into contact is likely to be a significant concern. In this context, any clear police checks that the researcher has received may help to assure school staff that he or she will present no danger to pupils, as well as enabling the school to demonstrate to others that the organisation has taken proper precautions in allowing access.

#### 2.6. *Tactic six – Exploitation of past links with the organisations*

Where the researcher has any previous connections with the organisations approached or the immediate local area, these associations may be emphasised in the

early approaches that he or she makes. Similarly, the use of contacts in terms of members of staff within the organisations can be invaluable in ensuring that the investigator gains the access that is desired.

#### 2.7. *Tactic seven – Receptiveness to suggestions*

It is possible that managers of the organisations will offer their own ideas the researcher about the tactics that he or she intends to use during the fieldwork particularly with regard to data collection methods and the sampling of individuals within their organisations. Some of the points made may even take the form of conditions. These may be helpful, however, as the manager is better equipped than the investigator to know the true situation "on the ground" and what is acceptable to personnel and users. Such stipulations may initially be resented by the researcher who, for his or her part, may have already formed a plan of how the study should take place and be reluctant to deviate from it. Nevertheless, unless the manager proposals conflict markedly with the aims of the project, the investigator may be well advised simply to agree in order to ensure that he or she is indeed allowed access into the organisation.

Sieber recognises how such a policy of consultation may be extended to include potential participants. If they are involved in the planning of the study, the researcher may learn how they are likely to react to the demands that he or she intends to impose on them and ultimately the methods employed may be made as acceptable as possible to the intended research subjects [15].

### 3. *Gaining access to individual informants*

If the researcher accepts Douglas's belief that "conflict is the reality of life; suspicion is the guiding principle" [16], the task of persuading individual people associate with the targeted organisations to participate in the project may appear daunting. Nevertheless, several of the investigator's strategies for gaining access to the organisation themselves are again suitable in this context. In particular, he or she may seek to use an endorsement from a "known sponsor", develop a reciprocal relationship between himself or herself and potential informants, maintain an open and honest perspective when answering questions about his or her work and emphasise any past association between himself or herself and the individuals within the organisations. Furthermore, if the support and approval of a gatekeeper can be gained, this individual, as well as controlling access, may serve as a key informant who introduces the researcher to others who may become participants. In addition, the investigator may wish to employ the following tactics.

### 1. *Tactic one – Prolonged engagement*

Although prolonged engagement with the research subjects is often understood to be a critical strategy for establishing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, it may also prove essential for merely securing the participation of those from whom the researcher would like to collect data. Lincoln and Guba suggest that, on entering an organisation, the investigator requires a period of "orientation and overview" in order to gain the trust of and to develop a rapport with potential informants [17]. Over time, any sense of threat that may accompany the researcher's presence will diminish and, with careful handling, erroneous associations which may be made between the investigator and authority figures will be revealed to be unjustified. Without such preliminary groundwork on the part of the researcher, however, individuals may simply be unwilling to contribute data.

### 2. *Tactic two – The "chameleon" approach*

This strategy is especially crucial in ethnographic research, in which the investigator seeks to immerse himself or herself in a particular community. Broadly, the researcher attempts to ensure that he or she is not wildly incongruous within the world of the participants or in terms of the culture of the organisation in which he or she is operating. As with prolonged engagement, the aim is to gain acceptance. Glesne and Peshkin note that the investigator's "appearance, speech and behaviour must be acceptable to... research participants" [18]. This may be achieved in advance of any formal data collection by wearing appropriate clothing, sharing the participants' interests and conversation, listening to their stories, using suitable language when contact with them and discussing experiences and problems that are of relevance to their lives. Indeed, Janesick recommends that strategies for gaining the trust of participants should begin as the researcher makes his or her earliest moves in the field [19]. If the researcher is in a position to stage preliminary meetings to address groups associated with the organisations in question – either staff or users – these may afford the investigator an ideal opportunity to make appropriate connections between his or her work, background, etc. and those of the potential informants. As Ely et al. recognise, a relationship of trust and cooperation should be maintained throughout the fieldwork [20]. Where the research is of an ethnographic nature and the group under study is a disadvantaged section of society, the willingness of the investigator to come involved in community activities, to provide ongoing help to members of the community by applying his or her skills to their problems and situations or simply to offer "a listening ear" can be invaluable in encouraging individuals to come forward and contribute data voluntarily in their own time and over an extended period.

### 3. *Tactic three – Use of "incentives"*

The use of incentives may form an extension of the policy of reciprocity, which a researcher may have already employed to gain access to the organisations. A

variety of approaches may be taken, ranging from the payment of each informant to the automatic entry of all participants into a lucky draw, where a prize may be given to one or a limited number of individuals. Both approaches suffer from problems, however. The first is likely to be expensive financially and students, in particular, may find it impracticable, whilst the latter is clearly less costly to the researcher but the incentive may be inadequate for some prospective informants as they are not guaranteed to benefit. Especially where payment is offered, the danger also emerges that, in order to fulfil their part of the "bargain", the informants feel obliged to tell the researcher what they believe he or she wishes to hear.

### 3.4. *Tactic four – Emphasis on the value of personal contributions*

Opportunities may be seized in preliminary meetings between the researcher and members of the organisations for the former to articulate to a wide audience the contribution that each individual can make to the work. Even if the possibility of providing some tangible incentive for the potential participants proves impossible, as Glesne and Peshkin note, "What you [as the researcher] do have that they value is the means to be grateful, by acknowledging how important their time, cooperation and words are; by expressing your dependence on what they have to offer; and by elaborating on your pleasure with their company" [21]. In many situations, such psychological benefits are not to be underestimated. Winning the trust of people in this way may play a major role in delivering what Janesick considers a key aim in qualitative research, namely to "capture the nuance and meaning of each participant's life from the participant's point of view" and to ensure that participants are "willing to share everything, warts and all, with the researcher" [22].

## 4. *Permission from interested parties*

Lincoln and Guba draw attention to a range of individuals, at different levels, whose cooperation must be secured for fieldwork to take place [23]. All concerned parties – gatekeepers of various types and prospective participants – should be provided with explanations of the work, with particular emphasis on its implications for them. If data is to be collected directly from, for example, those in care or youngsters aged under eighteen, not only will the researcher have to demonstrate that he or she has received a clear police check but he or she will also be likely to require express permission from those responsible for the individuals selected as research subjects. The need for this written interaction between the researcher and carers/parents does, however, afford the former an opportunity to present, in writing, an explanation of matters such as the nature of the work, the reasons for the researcher's choice of organisation and the measures taken to ensure the least possible disruption. This information may be provided in a letter that includes a formal consent slip to be signed by the carer/parent, although, since Flick warns that too much information

may confuse rather than enlighten the reader [24], the extent of such explanation should be restricted to no more than is necessary. A similar approach may be adopted in relation to the selected individuals themselves. Each should be informed of the purpose of the work, in language appropriate to his or her status, ability level and age, and questions asked must be truthfully answered.

## 5. Conclusion

Even though the task of gaining access both to organisations and to willing informants within them remains a challenge for many qualitative researchers, a number of strategies have been developed that have frequently proved effective. With regard to the former, these include

- citing support from some “authority”, who/which has already backed the work;
- attempting to secure entry through a gradual process in which onerous demands are not made on gatekeepers immediately or too quickly;
- striking bargains enabling both parties to benefit from the project;
- dealing with the concerns of gatekeepers openly and honestly;
- emphasising any professional or personal links that exist between the researcher and the organisation;
- remaining receptive to advice from gatekeepers on how the fieldwork should proceed.

In many cases, gaining access to individual informants who are associated with the organisation can also prove problematic. Nevertheless, several of the tactics outlined above are again appropriate. In addition, an investigator may increase his or her prospects of success through

- adopting a policy of prolonged engagement with those in the organisation;
- blending in as far as possible with the prospective participants;
- offering incentives to entice individuals to take part;
- demonstrating both implicitly and explicitly the value of the contributions that informants might make to the study.

Clearly, ensuring some element of reciprocity is a key ingredient in several of the strategies that may be employed, in terms of securing both the participation of an organisation and the cooperation of prospective informants within it. In several instances, however, a further prerequisite to achieving access involves gaining the approval of a third party who is, in some way, responsible for the welfare of the informants. Even when all the necessary permissions have been gained, it should still be remembered that, especially where the fieldwork is prolonged, positive relationships between the researcher on the one hand and the organisation and informants on the other must be maintained.

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# The Information Worlds of a Disadvantaged Community

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## 1. Introduction

This paper summarises the research to date of a PhD study that explores the information behaviour of people living everyday life in a 'disadvantaged' community. There has been little research into disadvantaged communities from the perspective of information behaviour within a UK context (Muddiman, 2000; Roach and Morrison, 1998; Marcella and Baxter, 2000).

The basic premise underpinning this research is that if the information needs of those living in disadvantaged communities are to be met, then their information worlds: their contexts, their realities, their information behaviour and their social constructs, must be understood. People living in disadvantaged communities have something unique to say about their information worlds, and it is this unique perspective that the research hopes to uncover. Context and meaning are inextricably bound, and without a holistic understanding, effective and meaningful information provision cannot be provided nor made accessible for disadvantaged communities by the institutions, such as public libraries, who serve them.

## 2. Background

Across the whole of UK government, action is underway to tackle inequality and social exclusion and to empower excluded individuals and communities. The UK government has invested millions of pounds into the development of improved services for the socially excluded, including access to learning and information, notably through the development of the People's Network (LIC, 1997) via public libraries. Access to information, including web-based information, is seen as a pre-requisite of inclusive citizenship. But open access does not necessarily translate into practical and effective use, or even use at all. By gaining an understanding of the "cultural machinery" (Crabtree et al, 1998) of the community, this study explores the information worlds of people living their everyday lives in a disadvantaged community in order to present a critical understanding of their information behaviour and to further our understanding of information seeking in context.

In his recent research report, *Open to All*, Muddiman (2000) calls for  
*research which explores the 'life world' of individuals, communities and social groups and relates it to information giving and seeking, learning, culture and recreation.*  
(p.185)

## 3. Research Aims

- To explore the information worlds of people living in a disadvantaged community.
- To investigate the barriers to effective transmission of information.
- To recommend ways in which the public library might overcome these barriers.

#### 4. The Research Question

*What is the information behaviour of residents within the small world of a disadvantaged community and how can their information needs best be served?*

#### 5. The Setting and the Sample

The location for the study is a community of people living on a 'deprived' estate in the North East of England. The estate is locally notorious and ranks within the top 10% most deprived wards nationally (National Statistics Office, 1999). A community centre on the estate is the site for the study.

A small but diverse sample has been chosen to allow for maximum variation (Patton, 1990). The sample comprises residents who use the local community resource centre, and it reflects the general make-up of the estate in terms of gender and age comprising men and women from 16 to 70. The group is for the most part unemployed or on long-term sickness benefits (two are working). As the purpose of the sample is to maximise information yield, it is not possible to give a pre-established number. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that emergent and sequential sampling can reach saturation point with as few as twelve respondents. A relatively small sample can produce great diversity, detailed information and rich description. So far, observation has involved approximately 30 residents of whom 9 have been interviewed in more depth. Several residents have shown concern about being interviewed in what they see as a more formal manner and so the process has been slow.

#### 6. Theoretical framework

This study draws on work from researchers in several areas, but particularly information studies and social policy. There have been various concepts and theories of information and information behaviour (Levitan, 1980; Nitecki, 1985; Wilson, 1981, 2000; Wilson & Walsh, 1996; Orna, 1999; Belkin, 1982; Sonnenwald, 1998), of disadvantage and social exclusion (Seeman, 1959; Merton, 1972; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001; Dudley, 2000), and of community (Goffman, 1959; Schutz and Luckmann, 1974; Douglas, 1980).

An interesting dichotomy has emerged between, on the one hand, researchers who maintain that public libraries contribute meaningfully to learning, to society, to culture and to the economy (Resource, 2001; Black and Crann, 2000; Kerslake and Kinnell, 1997) and those who have questioned the integrity of provision (Bishop, 1999; Harris, 1998; Roach and Morrison, 1998; Muddiman, 2000) suggesting that it is, in fact, marginal and superficial: a middle-class institution targeted at the middle-class.

There have been few studies of information behaviour in everyday life environments (Sayolainen, 1995) and although there is a tradition of research into the information behaviour of disadvantaged groups in the North America (Harris and Dewdney, 1994; Warner, Murray and Palmour, 1973; Ching-Chih and Hemon, 1982; Chatman, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1990 et seq.; Pendleton & Chatman, 1998; Dervin and Nilan, 1986; Spink, 1999; Bishop et al, 2000; Dervin, 1976; Hersberger, 2000) there has been little in the UK. Because of the current political emphasis on social exclusion, localised research is being actively encouraged by academics such as Muddiman (2000) who has observed that "*the information needs of many social classes and groups remain only dimly perceived*" (p. 185) and warrant further research.

Chatman's work with the underprivileged - the poor, the elderly and the disenfranchised - in America has been highly inspirational in this study. Chatman's term - '*information world*' (1985, 1991, 1992) formed the starting point of this research. This term refers to all information resources used by individuals or groups in solving problems, in learning, in leisure activities, and at work: that is, information as used in their everyday lives. The resources may be either formal, such as public libraries, or informal, such as family and friends. Information resources and small worlds together form what Chatman calls 'information worlds.'

## 7. Methodology

A naturalistic framework is appropriate for this research reflecting the researcher's ontological assumptions that reality is multiple, is experienced holistically, and is socially constructed and, additionally, that a human-centre viewpoint is essential (Guba and Lincoln, 1982).

The methodological approach is rooted in the qualitative paradigm and the study employs ethnographic methods. Ethnographic data collection techniques, including participant observation and in-depth interviewing, offer important advantages for this study: to examine social worlds, it is necessary to observe people's everyday behaviour and to listen to their stories in order to elicit their opinions and beliefs. Prolonged engagement in the field using participant observation has allowed time to develop crucial trust and build relationships.

Episodic narrative interviews (Flick, 1998) are being used to elicit contextual information about participants' lives as well as to discover the role of information in their lives. It is hoped that this technique, because it is holistic, informal, empowering, and a universal skill, will go some way towards bridging the cultural gap between the researcher and those being researched. Stories or narratives show how individuals interact with the world and how they try to make sense of the world. "*In order to express ourselves and make sense of our lives, we 'story' our experience, because it is through this process of storying that meaning is derived*" (Dwivedi and Garner, 1997: 19). Because the opportunity to tell their stories may be empowering for participants, narrative interviewing should bring benefits to both researcher and researched.

The research design is emergent to allow for refining the focus of the enquiry as data is collected and analysed (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). A grounded theory approach will present rich detailed information not built on any *a priori* theory but inductively derived from the study (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Ellis (1993) commends the grounded theory approach as being particularly useful

*where the objective is to develop an awareness of the perceptions that individuals or groups have of their information environment and the role information has in relation to their activities* (p.484).

However, a strong theoretical framework underpins this study.

The research takes the form of an in-depth case study with individual case studies embedded within it.

## 8. Progress to date

Entering an unfamiliar social world has been both fascinating and disturbing. It was several months before I felt any confidence that I was becoming accepted by residents. Those months

were spent, and continue to be spent, attempting (and sometimes failing) to make conversation, observing behaviour, joining in activities, listening to individuals, volunteering at events, and always being very much aware of my tenuous existence as an interloper on the estate.

The first year of the study was spent exploring relevant literature, determining the case study site and negotiating entry into the field. Methodological issues such as methodology and data collection methods were also explored.

The second year of the study has been spent in the field. Three phases of enquiry characterise this stage of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The first of these was "*orientation and overview*" (p.235). During this initial phase, I gained a sense of the context as well as emerging issues of the case through a five month "*prolonged engagement*" (p 266) in the field undertaking participant observation. This was borne out of necessity rather than choice: it quickly became apparent after the first few attempted interviews that residents weren't prepared to talk to a 'foreigner.' I needed to take a step back and gently get to know people without intruding so directly into their lives. Thus followed the period of participant observation. I spent time chatting to residents about everyday things: their families, local news, their hobbies and concerns and volunteering help in whatever capacity I could. Gradually I have been able to establish a measure of trust and to learn about their lives.

The second phase "*focused exploration*" (p 235) evolved naturally from the first and is currently unfolding, allowing a more focused and in-depth approach to salient issues as well as revealing new ones. Participant observation continues and is being supplemented by more focused questioning of residents and workers. These observations paint an increasingly illuminating picture of the participants and their everyday environment. Crucially, the period of observation has also furthered the essential development of trust between the researcher and the participants. However, because of the high level of trust needed, an extended amount of time in the field has been necessary. A sense of the context and the situation has been developed and the salient themes are beginning to emerge.

The final phase "*member checks and closure*" (p 235) will encourage verification of the findings with the residents.

## **9. Data analysis**

Data analysis is iterative and emerging insights and possible theories are being focused back into the next phase of data collection. All participant observation data and interview data are being transcribed and scrutinized for new and recurring insights and themes. A researcher's log, containing thoughts, hunches and reflections, has been kept in order to work through any issues that have arisen. The data have not yet been analysed using a data analysis software tool; however, *NVivo* has been purchased for this purpose.

## **10. Emerging themes**

- **Chaotic, difficult lives characterise the community** – unemployment, illiteracy, health problems, rape, incest, poverty, violence, debt, and drugs are all characteristics of their small world lives.
- Some community residents experience feelings of **alienation**, powerlessness, and isolation from the wider world.

- There is a strong **sense of community** within the estate and some people have said they enjoy living there.
- **Confidence and ambition are low.**
- Self-improvement, including **employment and training**, is met with **jealousy and confusion.**
- Residents feel **vulnerable** in unfamiliar situations.
- **Image** is important.
- Words like 'learning', 'course, and 'training' set up **semantic barriers.**
- **Local learning sessions** are often **poorly attended** (computer courses, basic skills courses, and the job club) although a **local history course was popular.**
- **Articulation** of concerns, needs and stories is difficult for some.
- **Trust** is crucial to relationship building and 'outsiders' are viewed with suspicion.
- There is also a **lack of trust among residents themselves**, so that although **word of mouth** is usually the pattern of communication, it is not always effective.
- Social networks of family, friends and specific workers are the norm for information flow.
- The public **library and other formal institutions do not seem to play a significant role** in participants' information worlds.
- The estate is strongly **matriarchal** with several 'grans' having strong roles.
- **Residents do not want 'outsiders' to know about their lives.**
- Participants live life 'here and now' and so information behaviour is constrained by a narrow outlook, and **information needs to be available immediately.**
- There is a tendency for residents not to look beyond the bounds of the community for information. A '**doorstep mentality**' exists. This may partly be due to the regeneration culture.
- Information needs and context are inextricably entwined and information needs on the estate are **everyday real-life coping issues.**

## ***11. Next steps***

Having now completed the first phase of the fieldwork, the researcher now intends to:

- Continue participant observation
- Continue analysing and reflecting on the data collected to date
- Analyse new data
- Continue with episodic narrative interviews while modifying the interview guide to enable and facilitate participants' articulation
- Consider alternate data collection techniques
- Draw up models of information worlds within a disadvantaged estate
- Continue to build vignettes of individual's information behaviour
- Build a model for public library service to the disadvantaged
- Carry out verification of results with research participants
- Write up findings and final thesis
- Disseminate findings

## ***12. Problems encountered***

Several problems have arisen during this study that I would like to discuss:



- The issue of gaining and subsequently maintaining trust is a crucial yet difficult issue in research with a socially excluded community, and some residents are uncomfortable: how does the researcher best deal with this?
- Articulation of information needs - problems and concerns - is difficult for residents: how does the researcher encourage articulation without leading the direction? What innovative methods might work?
- Alongside this, a second concern is the use of the word *information*. It is a difficult concept to pin down and even more difficult to explain. Asking individuals to explain the role of information in their lives thus requires creativity.
- Moving from being an observer to being an actively engaged researcher is problematic within this context: how can that best be achieved? Residents are used to me generally listening, not asking.
- Confidentiality and ethics have become problematic – publicly divulging personal details of chaotic lives makes me feel like a traitor, yet these stories are the essence of the research, and research is a public act. How do I reconcile the two?

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